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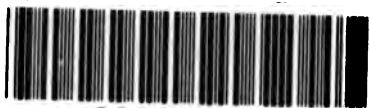
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SISTER MARY.

A Novel.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT," "MY
INSECT QUEEN," &c.

"The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard ;
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky ;
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
Enough that He heard it once ; we shall hear it by-and-by."

ABT VOGLER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1871.

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250. 3. 117.



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SISTER MARY.

I.—SYBIL'S PORTION.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT I HEAR IN THE CEDAR WALK.

JULY is not the best time of the year for giving a dance; but when does an invitation to a dance come amiss to young people who are free to accept it? It certainly did not come amiss to Mrs. Stacy's young friends. It was a marvel to me, where she could have collected so many

youths and maidens at a time of the year when Paterfamilias is leading his flock to “pastures new,” on Swiss mountains, or by German rivers, or by their own sea-shores. But then, in the country in the summer, a girl thinks little—and her admirers think less—of a drive, or a railway ride of sixteen or seventeen miles, and many of the guests at Plaistow Manor had come even farther than that.

Then there were family groups, the more numerous the more willing were their parents to avail themselves of such amusements as were comparatively within their reach, and for which they might contentedly surrender the more costly excursion to Baden or Scarborough. The waves of Pactolus had their sources far from Kelvycdon,—we were not a wealthy society,—some of us even went so far as to declare

that only vulgar people were ever very rich !

There were nine or ten families at Plaistow, averaging about two daughters a-piece. Among them were proud and happy mothers, with trains of from four to six !

As for cavaliers—there were two “reading parties,” (save the mark !) from Magdalene and St. John’s, some college friends of young Stacy’s, the officers of a regiment quartered at Helsham, and a few young men, friends or relatives of “the county people.” These, with the elders appertaining thereto, were sufficient to fill Mrs. Stacy’s rooms very respectably, especially as Plaistow Manor House was an old-fashioned mansion in which were no very spacious rooms. It was chiefly taken up with hall and stair-case. The hall was of

very imposing dimensions. It was entered from the carriage-drive by a broad flight of steps, and a terrace with a stone balustrade. The living rooms opened out of it on three sides, and there was, at the extreme end, a circular stair-case with a gallery running round it, on which opened the doors of the guest chambers.

The dancing was to be in the hall ; but Miss Henny having insisted on starting early, we arrived before it had begun. The girls who, like Sybil, had been invited for the archery, were still up-stairs completing their evening toilettes. Every now and then a merry laugh chimed from the upper windows, thrown wide open for the summer air ; or a fair face could be discerned peeping through the closed blinds at the new arrivals, or still more daringly, looking down over the balustrade of the circular stair-case

into the hall. Some groups of young men were loitering on the terrace, glancing wistfully from time to time, at the shadows that flitted across the blinds, as the musical laughter rippled down to their listening ears,—or gazing at the carriages that drew up at the door, as the elders slowly alighted, and their young charges swept with well-feigned unconcern past the interested observers.

The summer twilight had not yet faded, and the servants were just beginning to turn up the lamps in the hall, and, as I meekly followed my companion to the “tiring-room” at the end of it, I fervently hoped that they would still shed that chastened light while we re-crossed it, and so mercifully conceal from critical eyes the grotesque incongruities of her toilet, until we should have mingled with the crowd.

Through the half-open door I watched anxiously, as Miss Henny deliberately unpinned and shook out her skirt,—one lamp was turned up,—then she took off her flannel hood, and smoothed her grizzly curls, upon which she had not to-night placed her false front.—Another lamp turned up.

“ Oh, do make haste, Miss Henny, it is stifling hot here.”

“ No hurry, my dear,—we are not going to dance,—so we are keeping no intending partners in suspense.”

Two more lamps,—and, attracted like moths by the light, a party of gentlemen surges in from the terrace.

Miss Henny carefully opens her band-box —takes out her lugubrious head-dress, and smoothes out the long “weepers.” I watch her in sullen despondency, while a carriage

full of guests sweeps up to the hall door,— and she proceeds to adjust the atrocity on her Medusa tresses. No,—she pauses,— and turns her head to glance at the new arrivals, until I wish she would put it on ; for, of Miss Henny's head, it cannot be affirmed that it is, “when unadorned, adorned the most.”

“The major of the regiment, and his fat wife,”—she observes, — “she is marching straight into the presence chamber ; let us wait until she goes in. There,—I am ready now.”

And the last lamp glared up, and blazed on the ostrich plumes in her mourning cap, and the glittering spangles on her scaly robe, as I followed as “sucked in the wake of the luminous water snake,” and found myself, with her, in the centre of a masculine group of officers

and civilians, who stood near the door, and divided to let us pass.

I marked the astonishment--amounting to awe—with which they looked at her, and one youth,—the doctor's nephew,—whispered, more audibly than he intended to do—

“By Jove!—Hogge—in armour!”

Unluckily for him, the lady overheard him; to my disgust and horror, she stopped short—turned her lustrous eyes full on the speaker, who shrunk and cowered before her,—as she said, in the softest voice, and with the blandest smile—

“Ah, Mr. Charles Barnes!—so glad to see you here. So sorry you were plucked again at your last examination. I was afraid you would be too low-spirited to come to a dance; but, I suppose, one gets used to being plucked as to everything else

in time. The third time, perhaps, will bring you luck,—for you will try once more, will you not?"

And, as Mr. Charles Barnes, blushing to the tips of his budding moustache, seemed in no hurry to satisfy her laudable curiosity, Miss Henny rolled her eyes round the laughing by-standers, and with a smile which displayed all her strong white teeth, (they must have seemed fangs to her unhappy victim), she swept triumphantly into Mrs. Stacy's presence-chamber.

Our hostess was standing, elegantly dressed, and looking almost as young as her own daughter, in conversation with the Major's wife, Mrs. Campbell, and her enemy greeted her with an effusiveness, which, to anyone who knew Henny, meant mischief. Whatever might have been Mrs. Stacy's dismay, she concealed it perfectly. She

never attempted to fight with the weapons of rejoinder or repartee,—opposing only the shield of “passivity,” and entrenching herself behind the composure and apathy of good-breeding, in a way which never failed to exasperate her foe more than the bitterest things she could have said, had a bitter tongue been her forte.

Her reception of her eccentric guest was sublime in the graceful indifference which so plainly expressed without the slightest infringement of courtesy, that nothing that Miss Hogge chose to wear, or do, or say, could possibly be a matter of either interest or surprise. Unfortunately, the Admiral, naturally obtuse, understood nothing of his lady’s feminine tactics, and his old friend’s singular headgear seemed to arouse former associations in his mind. “Why, Miss Henny!” he said, “has something happened

since I saw you last? is it ‘wooed, and wedded, and widowed, and a?’ Have you had a husband and lost him, within the last fortnight?”

“Perhaps I wear mourning for the husband I couldn’t get, Admiral!” returned the unabashed spinster. “You’ll give me credit for mourning him sincerely, won’t you?”

“Nay,” said the old gentleman gallantly, “it is for *him*, not *you*, to mourn.”

“Well, then, Admiral, I wear weeds for luck. I have seen them bring a bridal veil within the year!” Here Mrs. Stacy put up her eye-glass, and calmly scrutinised the plume in her visitor’s cap. Her too speedy re-marriage had scandalised the S——shire people, in past times, but she could afford to disregard an allusion as old nearly as Henny’s spangles; and Colonel Brereton stepped forward to prevent any renewal of

hostilities, and placed me and my companion on a *causeuse*, in a snug recess, where, as fresh arrivals crowded rapidly into the room, we were soon comparatively isolated.

“ You should have been among this morning’s guests, Miss Wharnecliffe,” he said with a smile, “ that you might have witnessed your pretty sister’s triumphs in archery.”

“ Sybil’s triumphs? why she knows nothing of archery! If she struck the target, it must have been by chance, not skill.”

He bent down towards me, still smiling, but with lowered voice.

“ Mervyn and Darrell could tell you how fatal her aim has been, although I quite agree with you that it was unpremeditated. Sybil is no coquette. But I have to tell you, fair sister May, that your little maiden

has drawn a prize, as prizes are counted in these days, in her first venture."

"What do you mean?" I enquired anxiously.

"I mean, that this youth whom she has so bewitched, is no obscure artist, but a man of family and fortune. Wilfred Darrell, of Dyneford, in Somersetshire."

"Who told you, Johnnie?"

"Ah, Miss Henny, I am beforehand with you, you see. My friend Cameron, whom I met at Helsham yesterday, told me; but Miss Wharnecliffe does not look as delighted at my discovery as she ought to be."

"Why should I be delighted? I do not like the young man."

"Not like him? Not like the heir to ten thousand a year, who is paying court to your dowerless sister? that is rank social heresy!"

"He has, so far, given us no right to say that he is paying court to her. Why is he loitering here almost incognito? why has he pretended to be an artist at all?"

"I always told you," said Henny, "that you are to blame for that. You took his profession for granted, and he has not been at the trouble to undeceive you. He has borne his own name, and a man is not bound to announce the amount he pays for income tax, in every strange place he comes to. You have never shown him any hospitality, nor has any one else in Kelvydon that I know of. Is he here to-night, Johnnie?"

"Certainly, he has been here all day."

"And does Mrs. Stacy know who he is?"

"I think not. She did not meet Cameron, and I considered myself in duty bound to give Miss Wharnecliffe the first

intelligence, but it does not seem to please her as I hoped it would."

"I do not care about Sybil marrying a rich man, if that is his only, or chief claim," I murmured. "She has never been accustomed to wealth, and could be very happy without luxuries that would be indispensable to a girl differently brought up, if——" Here I stopped short, as the reflection suddenly presented itself, that our very modest position would be altered, when I married Thorold, and that he might wish a higher connection for Sybil, than would at any time satisfy me.

Colonel Brereton noticed the pause and laughed. "You are right, Miss Wharnecliffe, in hesitating to pledge yourself to Sybil's moderate views, on such a subject, but as yet, I am sure, she is as unworldly as yourself."

"Or as Mrs. Stacy is *not*," said grim Henny; "so, May, you had best see that Sybil secures her prize, before it is disputed with her. There is the band tuning up, come into the hall, and let us look at the dancing; there is nothing to see in this corner but people's backs." As we rose, Miss Stacy came up to us, hand-in-hand with Lassie, all sparkling with smiles. Constance was, I thought, really a graceful and attractive girl, though rather "too much of the Lydia Languish," as Henny phrased it.

"Will you not dance, Miss Wharnecliffe?" she asked.

"Of course she will," interposed Colonel Brereton, "she is engaged to dance the first dance with me."

"It must be by deputy then," I said, "for I have taken root as a wallflower."

“ Flowers planted unseasonably will not root,” answered the Colonel ; “ but is Sybil to be your deputy ?” but Sybil laughed saucily, and held up her card, inscribed with a long row of names, among which I noticed a D. of very frequent recurrence.

“ Miss Stacy shall be my deputy. I dare say, while finding partners for her guests, she has left a vacancy somewhere on her own list ?” for I had noticed the wistful glance, and the faint colour in Constance’s cheek, when Colonel Brereton had declared himself my partner ; he never noticed anything of the kind, but he turned good humouredly to her.

“ Conny, can an old fellow like me dare to hope for such a good partner ?”

“ Oh, yes, Cousin John, I would not engage myself for this first dance, until—until——”

"Until you asked her, Johnnie," said Henny, but still Colonel Brereton only laughed carelessly, he seemed not to have the remotest suspicion that Conny's feelings for him, could be other than purely "cousinly."

It was Mr. Mervyn, however, and not Mr. Darrell, who, rather to my surprise, bore Sybil away for the first dance. Miss Hogge and I took up our position in a recess in one of the deep bay-windows in the hall, whence we could look on at our leisure. Miss Henny's observations were, as usual, more free than courteous. Her voice too, although low and soft, had a peculiar *oiliness* of tone, that made it more clearly audible, than if she had spoken in a shriller key; and to my consternation, I soon perceived, by the unconcealed laughter of the young men who gathered round

us, that her comments on the scene before her, were by no means addressed to my private ear.

Miss Henny was highly popular with the young men of the neighbourhood. Many of them she had known and petted from their boyhood. She encouraged them to visit her at all times, listened sympathetically to their love stories, and appreciatively to their successes or their escapades. She permitted them unbounded license with the cigars on her mantel-piece, and the bottled beer in her mortuary cellarette—she was so thoroughly *bon camarade* with them, that they forgot or forgave her sex, and pronounced her unanimously “a jolly old boy.”

I felt myself sadly out of place beside her, as the laughing youths drew nearer, as she twinkled her black eyes gleefully, and

smoothed out her “weepers” with affected demureness, giving utterance the while to such remarks as these,—

“ So that’s the fashion, is it ? why it’s nearly as old as mother Eve’s time ! Look at those bull-headed girls, with their scanty clothing ! There’s Lucy Granville, she has spent so much on all that false hair, that she has had nothing left for a decent dress ; she ought to put her hair, now that she has got it, to the use Lady Godiva made of hers ! Dressed, indeed ! she is dressed, as a cook dresses a fowl, by stripping it. How that Constance ‘clips’ Johnnie ! He’ll not feel the loss of his one arm, when both of hers are so much at his service. How she rolls her eyes ; I wonder she is not afraid of losing them. I believe if you gave her a tap at the back of her head they would tumble out. There’s sad wear

and tear of eyes here, to-night. Look at Julius Mervyn's, they are reciting all Solomon's Song to little Sybil, while hers are glancing shyly back the messages that are flashed at her across the hall, by young Darrell's. Who is that man just come in, on whom Mrs. Stacy is showering such an illumination of gracious smiles?"

Young Barnes hastened to answer. He had forgiven Henny her attack upon him, or was anxious to conciliate her.

"That is Lord Radford, Miss Henny, the new owner of Lyndon; he came down last week, and is going to stay till the grouse-shooting."

"How did she manage to get hold of him so soon, I wonder? She is in her glory now, with a live lord to parade. He is a quiet-looking old gentleman enough. May,

here comes Sybil back to your sheltering wing."

I was glad to plead the excuse of the seat in the open window being too draughty for Sybil, to accept Mr. Mervyn's escort to another part of the hall, leaving Henny and her little band of choice spirits to enjoy their merriment without the restraint of our presence. But young Darrell soon came up to claim my sweet charge, and as she was whirled past me in his arms, she looked so bright, so radiant with a girl's innocent enjoyment of her first ball, that I felt quite impatient of the sorrowful gaze with which Mr. Mervyn watched her. Yet I pitied him, too, poor fellow ! Evidently the artist, though but an amateur, had stolen all the bright colours from his rival's life-picture, to lay them upon his own. Merrily the dancers' feet beat time to the

gay music of the orchestra, but for poor Mr. Mervyn there was an inner discord that marred all the harmony.

For a long time I watched the glittering scene, half amused, and yet with a feeling of sadness; that sense of loneliness that had so often oppressed me, a yearning for the long delayed sunshine of my life, for the eyes that should once more seek mine, with the love-light in them.

The night was very sultry, and as the hall grew more and more heated, some figures, not always singly, stole out into the summer air, and loitered on the terrace, leaning over the stone balustrade. Now and then a sally would be made by some anxious mother, to re-capture a truant daughter, who had strayed out into the night dew, on the arm of some "ineligible;" but some effected a successful flight, and

were seen flitting about among the fragrant shrubs below. After supper the deserters became bolder, and the matrons, wrapping themselves in hoods and mufflers, preparatory to their drive home, gave more determined chase.

While I sat watching these various manœuvres Mrs. Stacy glided up to me, on the arm of a pleasant-looking old gentleman, whom she presented to me as Lord Radford, and departed, having deposited him at my feet (I may say so, as he stood before me). I wondered why Lord Radford should wish to know me, but he claimed my acquaintance in right of that he had previously formed with my little sister. To my apologies for her intrusion on his grounds, he answered, laughingly,—

“ Your beautiful sister carries her wel-

come everywhere in her face, Miss Wharnecliffe ; what a charming child she is."

" You must not let her hear you speak of her as a child, Lord Radford : she claims full womanly dignity to-night, in right of her sixteen summers and her first ball ! " and I looked across the hall, to where Sybil, flushed and dimpling, was replying to what seemed to be a very low murmur from Darrell.

" Sixteen ! " repeated the nobleman, " why, I thought she had been but fourteen, at the most ; but, indeed "—as his glance followed mine—" I see now that she is older than I took her for, at first, and still handsomer ; and there is my young friend Darrell, who has evidently been improving his luck of a chance meeting."

And here Lord Radford paused, still contemplating the pair through his gold

eye-glasses, with an air, half amused and half perplexed, until they suddenly vanished, when he turned again to me.

“Do you see much of Darrell, Miss Wharnecliffe?”

“I have never met him in society until this evening,” I answered; “but we often see him in Kelvydon, and we meet him in our walks. He takes sketches of our scenery, you know, and is so devoted to his pursuit, that, until to-night, he has always been supposed in Kelvydon to be a professional artist.”

Lord Radford laughed heartily.

“That is not saying much for the connoisseurship of Kelvydon; for Darrell, although a very fair amateur painter, would make very little way in art as a profession. Fortunately for him he has more reliable resources.”

“So I understand. The mistake arose from a report that he had come to Lyndon Park to execute some commission of your Lordship’s respecting the paintings there.”

“Oh, ah, yes, I see. There was a Turner among the paintings I bought at Lyndon, which he had been told was a companion picture to one he has at Dyneford, and we thought, if it were so, we might manage an exchange. He came down with me to see it, and was so charmed with this scenery, that he thought he would like to stop awhile in it, and I placed the Lodge at his disposal for as long as he liked.”

My curiosity, or at least, my interest, was too strong for my good breeding, and I pressed my enquiries,

“Mr. Darrell is an intimate friend of your Lordship’s?”

“ His father was an old friend of mine, but he died when this lad was a child, and I never saw him until I met him last winter at Nice, with some people I knew very well. I don’t wonder that he finds this country so attractive. By Jove ! if it were not that I know on very good authority——”

“ Lord Radford, *would* you mind coming to the Admiral with me ? He has something very particular to say, and you know, he is so infirm on his feet, he cannot come to you.”

And thereupon Mrs. Stacy swept away my “ distinguished ” interlocutor, breaking off the conversation just as I seemed on the verge of hearing some important communication respecting the mysterious stranger, whom I was no more to call the artist.

But before I had time to speculate on

the probable meaning of Lord Radford's "if," Miss Henny, in her scaly robe, came winding towards me, and whispered,

"It is time for me to be at home, I have ordered our fly round."

"Very well, I am ready. Where is Sybil?"

"Where, indeed! a fine chaperon you make! however, you will not have to perform that duty much longer, I fancy. That girl of yours is in the cedar-walk with young Darrell; I saw him lead her through the conservatory, that way, ten minutes ago."

"I must go and bring her in. How imprudent girls are!"

And so, in my turn, I prepared to give chase to my truant. As I passed through the conservatory, Colonel Brereton overtook me.

“ You are looking for Sybil ?” he said, “ will you send me, I know these grounds better than you do.”

No ; I would go myself, but I did not decline his escort, and he led me into the gardens, scrutinising, as we went, the little scattered groups that were sentimentalising in the moonlight, but in none of them did we find my runaway.

At last we came to a beautiful avenue of grass, bordered on each side with magnificent deodoras, and other coniferous trees ; their long boughs sweeping to the ground, and throwing masses of flickering shadow across the white moonlight that streamed like a silver day upon the path. The S——shire people always chose moonlight nights for their gala receptions, on account of the long drives home. Colonel Brereton was silent, and our steps made no sound

upon the velvet turf, and we were within a few yards of a rustic seat placed under the massive branches of a cedar, before we perceived the objects of our search, I stopped involuntarily.

There they were, quite unobservant of our stealthy approach. Sybil's head was turned from us, but Darrell's arm was round her, and he was bending eagerly over her to look into her downcast eyes, while he murmured, in passionate tones, every accent of which we heard distinctly, in the stillness of the night—

“Sybil! my sweetest! my own love! just one word, one look, to say——”.

“My child! the dews are falling heavily, you will take cold.”

They both started at my voice—Darrell hastily withdrew his arm, and rose to his feet. I suppose it is not pleasant to

be surprised in the midst of an ardent love-scene, still, as he glanced from me to Colonel Brereton, who was biting his moustache to suppress a laugh, his extreme confusion was more, I thought, than even his embarrassing position need have occasioned.

But Johnnie was merciful—"I will leave Miss Wharnecliffe in your charge, Darrell," said he, "while I go to look after Miss Hogge."

He went off accordingly, and Mr. Darrell looked after him with anything but an amiable expression of countenance, while I folded the shawl I had brought with me round Lassie. But as we turned to go back to the house, she lifted one glance to her lover, a glance so bright with modest tenderness, with innocent confidence, that his own face brightened

instantly, and coming to her side, he drew her hand within his arm, and held it clasped in his, until we came in sight of the other guests, when he dropped it, and bending down to her, whispered something, to which she seemed to give a bashful assent, and addressing me for the first time, he said—

“ You will let me call at Woodglen, to-morrow, Miss Wharnecliffe ?”

What could I say ? Sybil’s eyes had given her consent. He had won and would wear her, I suppose, heedless of any yea or nay from *me*.

CHAPTER XVII.

LASSIE'S CROOKED STICK.

" **B**UT, Mr. Darrell, I really do not understand why there should be any secrecy in the matter, since, as you say, you are your own master, and have no parents to whom you are accountable for your choice, or who could be displeased at it."

" Pardon the interruption, Miss Wharnecliffe, it is not 'secrecy,' I ask, but only *reserve*—and only that, if you insist on a long engagement. If you will comply with my wish, and give your sister *at once* into

my care, you can accompany us next month, if you will, to Madrid."

"To Madrid? next month?—and you have only recently succeeded to your estate in Somersetshire."

"There is a great deal to be done at Dyneford, before I can take my wife there. Sybil will like to winter in Spain, and I have friends at Madrid to whom I wish to present her."

"You are wandering from the question, Mr. Darrell, which is, why do you wish your engagement to be kept secret? As for marrying in such a hurry, and posting off to the world's end, that is not to be thought of for a moment; Sybil is far too young to be confided to the care of an almost entire stranger; she must wait until her guardian returns to England next spring, before anything can be defi-

nitely settled. *I* naturally think that while this arrangement is pending, it is well that it should not be generally talked about ; but it is not flattering to my sister or to me, that the proposal to keep silence about it should emanate from you.”

My intended brother-in-law laughed uneasily.

“ What feminine inconsistency ! You are angry and suspicious, yes, Miss Wharnecliffe, *suspicious* of me, for feeling as averse, as you admit you are yourself, from forming with Sybil the subject of Kelvydon gossip for twelve months to come ; yet, I must say, I think no man of delicate feeling would be willing to expose the girl he loves to the incessant, vulgar tittle-tattle of a second-rate provincial society.”

“ You are very polite to the society of which ‘the girl you love,’ is a present

member, but if you wish to visit my sister as her accepted lover, without being acknowledged openly as such, the 'tittle-tattle' you are so afraid of is likely to be more disagreeable, and more difficult to silence. However, a speedy marriage being out of the question, you and Sybil may settle between you what account you will give of yourselves to the Kelvydon gossips. Your silence, your denial even, will not affect *me*, if it does not offend *her*."

"Sybil, I am sure, will trust me."

The appeal was responded to, of course, as such appeals usually are. My sister had been standing apart, silently building a bower of chickweed over her canary's cage. She made a step forward to her lover's side, and slipped her hand into his, but almost instantly withdrew it, and coming round to where I sat, she twined her arms round my

neck and laid her cheek to mine, whispering softly—

“Don’t be unkind, sister May, I can trust him; I do trust him, wholly. He will do what is best for me. I do not wish the Kelvydon people or the Plaistow people to know anything about us. He belongs to me, and you, only—only *ours*, May dear, —why should they know?”—(Then, in a lower whisper still, while the soft cheek glowed warmer)—“Do try to like him a little, for my sake, May.”

And so, of course, I yielded, and gave my reluctant permission to Mr. Wilfred Darrell to visit occasionally at Woodglen, as my darling sister’s accepted lover, although these visits were to be placed under greater restrictions than are usual in such circumstances, out of regard to discretion, necessary in an engagement which was to

be kept secret from all but Sybil's "guardian" for some months at least.

This rather stormy interview had taken place the day after Mrs. Stacy's ball, when Mr. Darrell presented himself at Woodglen to ask my consent to visit my sister, a consent which I suspect he would not have asked if after the surprise of the preceding night, he could have hoped to meet her without it! With all my wish to look with favourable eyes on one whom Sybil loved, I was conscious of a feeling almost of repulsion for this youth, for which I could not account. Hitherto, I had seen so little of him. It was wonderful how many tête-à-têtes he had contrived with Lassie, which I had been quite powerless to prevent. Two young people can manage such matters so easily when both are minded to do it. Mr. Darrell, for one, had evi-

dently given his whole attention to the subject, and—I hope that fact had no share in my prejudice against him,—he had certainly never wasted a moment in the endeavour to conciliate me when that moment could be more pleasantly employed in lingering beside Sybil, when I was occupied in shopping, or in conversation with friends in the street, or on a woodland path too narrow for three.

Even now, although his personal references were unexceptionable, and his explanations apparently straightforward and satisfactory, they were given with a kind of uneasy petulance, as something that must be gone through, rather as a concession to custom than to feeling, some form to be got over and done with, before he could be admitted to intimacy ; not with a lover's eager desire to remove every barrier

that could possibly intervene between him and the frankest intercourse with the kindred of his future wife.

After all, may be, I am hypercritical ; I do not understand these affairs, and perhaps Mr. Darrell sees it, and is impatient at having to ask his lady's hand of an ignorant spinster without the authority of years or experience. It would be so different if my darling had a brother to arrange for her,—and she will have one before long, I trust. Next spring Thorold will be with us. She is only sixteen, she shall not be married until she is seventeen—on that point I am resolved ; Mr. Darrell's notion of marrying in a month, and swooping off with the girl to Spain, is perfectly preposterous ! Perhaps, although he tells me he has no near relatives, he may have some influential ones, from whom he may

fear some reluctance in welcoming a little unformed school-girl among them, without family connexion or fortune. Ah, how can he look on that sweet face and remember these trifling disadvantages ? But men,—even men in love,—do remember them. I know it is a vexation to Thorold, though chiefly for my sake, that his brother, Sir Franklin, and his haughty wife, so persistently refuse to recognise the possibility of his remaining true to a woman who has had to earn her own livelihood, even though that necessity exists no longer, and though he was affianced to her in more prosperous days. Yes, that I think must explain Mr. Darrell's rather unloverlike anxiety to conceal a conquest of which most men would be so proud. He wishes to marry at once, before his friends can offer any remonstrance, and carry her away, until they have cooled

down and reconciled themselves to the irreparable. Failing this, he wishes to gain time, and watch for a favourable opportunity of conciliating them, whoever they may be. He gives me the idea of being just the man who would act so, impulsive and weak, as those always are who are habitually governed by mere impulse ; with the petulance of one who is unaccustomed to restraint, yet with the timidity which shrinks from confronting any painful consequence of his unreflecting actions. This is the character I read, or fancy I read, on his smooth but low forehead, in the restless fire of his dark grey eyes, which flash a keenly questioning glance, but soon wander away from the reply, and in the irresolute quiver of the mouth, expressive of more sensibility than sweetness.

But Sybil sees nothing of all this in his face, how indeed can she? At her age could I have read in my Thorold's features anything but the love I only looked for there?

And here I forgot Mr. Darrell, and his good or ill looks, and fell a-musing on the change that must have passed over my lover's face since I beheld it ten years ago. And oh, what joy to feel that no change can come over his or mine that will not be endeared and made sacred by mutual love and truth!

Shall I tell Sybil, now that she is made "free of the guild" of maidens wooed and won? now that she has entered on her womanly heritage of faith and hope? Shall I tell her my secret—that the guardian she is expecting is the tried lover of my youth? No, I think not, yet. It would

be hard to repose a confidence in her, and forbid her to share it with her beloved, as she would naturally wish to do, while I do not feel at all inclined to entrust Mr. Darrell with a secret in which he would take so little interest, although he would use it as an additional argument of my “inconsistency” in disapproving of a few months’ reserve in him, though in my own case I have maintained it for years—and to my own sister, too ! I could not expect him, nor even Sybil, to see that the cases are not parallel. So I will keep silence until Thorold returns, and then, since the child has eyes and ears, she will not be long in guessing the state of affairs and saving me the trouble of a formal announcement ; meantime I will go and discuss things in general with my quaint confidante, Miss Henny.

Off I set, accordingly, and was joined at the corner of the street by Mr. Mervyn, looking more than usually pensive and melancholy.

Poor Mr. Mervyn!—he never certainly had the ghost of a chance of winning my pet; she never cast a look in his direction, even before Mr. Darrell appeared on her horizon; but, doubtless, the melancholy curate believed that he might have succeeded, had no rival disputed the field of favour.

“Alone, Miss Wharnecliffe?” he said, “I hope your sister has not over-fatigued herself at Plaistow yesterday?”

“Sybil is quite well, thanks, Mr. Mervyn, but I am going to have a chat with Miss Hogge, who does not, as you know, care for young ladies’ company.”

“Nor for any lady’s much,” smiled the curate. “It is the marvel of Kelvydon

how you have contrived to win her regard. The attraction must be in contrast, for, assuredly, there is no point of resemblance between you."

"I am not conscious of much resemblance to Miss Henny, certainly ; but there is, I suppose, some sympathy between any two human souls, if only they were awake to feel it."

Mr. Mervyn's attention already wandered.

"Miss Sybil is at home ?" he enquired.

My hair stood on end ! Surely he is not come to call at Woodglen, and find young Darrell there !

"She is at home," I answered, feeling myself grow very red ; "but she is—I left her—very much occupied,"—and I blushed still deeper with the consciousness of how very highly Mr. Mervyn would disapprove

of Sybil's present occupation, since it had no reference to *him*!

The young man noticed my embarrassment, and misinterpreted it.

"You do not like me to call when you are from home? I dare say you are right," he said, resignedly. "I only wished to give Miss Sybil back her glove. I picked it up last night, after you went away, in Mrs. Stacy's conservatory; but I will give it to you. I know it is your sister's. I saw her trimming it the last time I was at Woodglen."

He took from his waistcoat pocket (next his heart) the tiny white glove, with a little blue ribbon edging at the wrist; but as I held out my hand for it, he drew it back, and looked wistfully into my eyes.

"I wanted to ask her to let me keep it; but, perhaps, it will be best that you should

take it, that I should say nothing to her,—nothing ever more,—about any hope of mine!"

"It will be best so—far best—believe me, Mr. Mervyn," I answered gently, and took the glove from his hand, which "nor gave, nor yet withheld it;" and then we walked on in silence till we reached Miss Hogge's door, where he would have left me, but that Miss Henny herself opened it, and drew us both into her hateful back parlour. She was doing penance for her unwonted brilliancy of attire the preceding night, in a chintz morning gown, which, to no imagination could symbolise purity,—in slippers down at heel, and her wig awry; yet the best-dressed lady in England could not have evinced more utter unconsciousness that her toilette could provoke any adverse criticism. As far as Mr. Mervyn was con-

cerned, I doubt that he would have noticed if she had had his own Sunday coat on, as he sat gloomily down upon her favourite coffin, with an air of dejection as profound as if his dearest friend had been inside it.

“What is the matter now?” she enquired,—“has the old rector waked up, and reproved you for dancing at Plaistow Manor last night?”

“I only danced one quadrille with Miss Sybil,” pleaded the clerical offender. “I would not have danced with anyone else,—and she promised me that a fortnight ago.”

“Could you plead that excuse to your bishop?” asked Miss Henny, solemnly. “Can you excuse to your own conscience such a dereliction of principle?”

Mr. Mervyn looked up startled, and

seeing the merry mischief in Henny's eyes, turned away with a "Pish!"

"'Pish,' indeed," repeated the lady—"that is the way with you clergy; it is not that a thing is wrong in itself, but that people might think it wrong in *you*, which frightens you so."

"You know I do not think dancing wrong," answered the curate; "but if my bishop,—or even my parishioners,—thought it unseemly in me, I should very deeply regret having given cause of offence, the more so—"

He stopped,—and Miss Henny, who seemed in an evil mood to-day, took up the sentence.

"The more so, as they might not admit the force of the temptation? Well, rest you merry, my good child, nobody blames you. For my part, I wish our clergy

would dance a little more, so they would sing a little less ; I am obliged to open my own house door, because the young ladies of your choir have found out that my little maid has ‘got a voice,’ and are always sending for her to ‘practise.’ Says her mother to me yesterday—‘ She’s a learning “Great Gory Anne’s Chance,” now, mum, and O Lor, she do sing it beautiful.’ Musical people seem to me the only ones who can derive gratification from their art in its lowest degree of merit. Painters do not care for daubs, nor poets for doggerel.”

“ What makes you so fractious to-day, Miss Henny ?” I interposed, for poor Mr. Mervyn was too depressed to be roused even in defence of his pet crotchet. “ Are you spiteful because Mrs. Stacy’s party was such a success ?”

"Was it a success?" she said, significantly. "Julius Mervyn does not seem to think so, whatever Mr. Darrell may."

The curate looked up again with a start, and Henny politely offered him her snuff-box; but that mode of consolation being declined somewhat unappreciatively, she took a pinch herself, and resumed—

"Mrs. Stacy thinks it a success doubtless, because she had a real live lord to parade at it,—only a *poor* lord" (with a sniff); "but he's better than none. One would think titles were catching."

Here she turned with sudden ferocity on the hapless curate.

"Julius Mervyn, you make me sick, squatting on that coffin, like a raven with the pip! If you can't look brighter than that, you had better go, before you turn my beer sour."

This beer, by the way, was a pure myth of Henny's. I afterwards discovered that her lugubrious chest contained only her late father's manuscripts.

Mr. Mervyn arose dejectedly. "I am not very good company certainly, Miss Henny," he said meekly; "but I did not intend to intrude my low spirits on you. You made me come in. I am quite out of tune this morning."

"Well, off with you then, to the school-room, where your grand choir is practising. I daresay they are as much 'out of tune' as you are. I will let you out, and bolt the door after you."

"I will let him out, Miss Henny," I said, for I felt such pity for the young man that I longed to speak a word of comfort to him, though, when my hand was on the lock of

the door, I faltered, scarcely knowing what comfort I had to offer. However, he understood the intention, and murmured gratefully—

“Thanks for your sympathy, Miss Wharnecliffe; I have been hoping against hope ever since—until—” and he paused.

“Be strong, Mr. Mervyn, you can find strength in work. This is a disappointment to you, but try to bear it bravely.”

“I will try,” he answered, “even sorrow should be a gain to me, if it helps me in self-devotion.”

He passed into the street, and I returned to Miss Hogge.

“Now, May, you need not tell me! Sybil has refused Mervyn, and accepted young Darrell!”

“She has not refused Mr. Mervyn, for he has never asked her.”

“All the same, she has taken Darrell, and my belief is, my dear, that *she has chosen the crooked stick!*”

CHAPTER XVIII.

I WRITE TO LAURA TRESHAM.

IF Mr. Darrell really fancied that his engagement could long remain unsuspected in a little country town, where everybody was intently gazing into everybody else's doors and windows, he was strangely mistaken. All that Sybil and I could do, we did. To the questioning of the few who supposed themselves sufficiently intimate to venture any inquiry on the subject, I returned a chilling reply, that I could not permit it to be discussed in reference to my young sister, or even alluded to. While

any hint, whether playful or serious, addressed to Sybil, was met only with a bright blush, resentful rather than bashful—an averted face, and a resolute silence. Indeed, the only approach to anger or sullenness that ever shadowed that sweet, sunny face, was in the cloud that always passed over it at any attempt to wrest from her the cherished secret that she defended, "loyal to the least wish" of him who bade her guard it.

Still, Mr. Darrell's visits could not remain unnoticed, nor his prolonged stay at Lyndon unremarked on. Servants will gossip. Visitors would drop in, and more frequently, by some odd coincidence, when the youth happened to be with us, and although I was always present, I do not think that it ever occurred to the most censorious, that the young heir of Dyneford was courting *me!*

However, my practice as a governess had taught me a certain repressiveness of manner, and when my acquaintance saw that it was my will to keep silence on the affair, they ceased to allude to it in my hearing, though I daresay, among themselves, they repaid themselves with interest, for their enforced reserve.

From the young man himself, they had no chance of receiving either confirmation or denial of any reports they might set afloat. Since it had become known that he was no struggling artist, but a person of wealth and position, all the best families in the neighbourhood would have welcomed him to their houses, had he been willing to meet their advances. But he repelled them haughtily, or coldly ignored them, holding himself aloof from every possible chance of associating with anyone in the county,

scarcely even excepting Lord Radford, whose house he had quitted on the old nobleman's return to it, although he still lingered in the village of Lyndon, in lodgings at a farm-house there. He found himself quite unmolested in his retirement.

A few days after Mrs. Stacy's archery meeting, the old Admiral had been ordered to the sea-side, and Plaistow Manor was deserted. Colonel Brereton was away in Scotland. Mr. Mervyn had buried himself and his sorrows in his parish work, and was never seen or heard of, except in his church, his schools, or his choir (from which the sweetest voice was missing), and Mr. Darrrell had no one near him to comment on his movements, unless it were Lord Radford or some of his party, who were not likely to hear much of Kelvydon gossip, or, hearing, to heed it.

And so time passed on, the yellow harvest was gathered in, the call of the little brown birds was silenced, as covey after covey was scared by the sportsmen's guns from the stubble or fallow fields.

On the hill-side, the purple heather had bloomed and faded, a dim red was beginning to tinge the berries of wild rose and mountain ash, and a faint gold the leaves of the horse-chestnut, and now and then, when a light breeze stirred, a leaf, tinted like a flower, would flutter down upon the path.

But, thought I, as I strolled through the woods, with—not beside—Sybil and her lover, or busied myself with my flower-vases, while that endless discussion went on in the drawing-room, about that never-to-be-finished painting,—but the hint of coming winter has no threat for them, to whom “the

voice that breathed through Eden," speaks only of Love's unchanging spring.

"For *them*?" was it for both, or only for her? As I watched them, I sometimes doubted if the innocent happiness that spoke in every look and gesture of my darling's was fully shared by her lover. Often when she had quitted his side, I noticed a restlessness in his manner, a gloomy thoughtfulness in his eyes, that seemed a little strange in a man who possessed youth, health, riches, and the heart of the girl whom he loved. For Wifred Darrell loved Sybil, there could be no doubt of *that*. He seemed to live upon her sweet looks, to watch her every movement, to hang upon her lightest word. No shadow ever rested on his brow in her society. I have watched him standing in the window, while she was absent on some trifling domestic duty, and

seen his delicate, but rather effeminate features sadden, his brow contract and darken, as with an inward pain until, half in fear, and half in pity, I have been on the point of going up to him, and entreating him to trust me with his secret anxiety, whatever it might be.

And then, Sybil's light step would cross the lawn, or her blithe voice would be heard, trilling some joyous carol, and the eager light would flash back into the young man's face, sweeping away every trace of sadness, and transforming it as completely as when a rainbow spans a thunder-cloud.

And the longer he knew her the more his passion seemed to grow. He rarely spoke of the future, and never of his past ; but he waited on her footsteps like a spaniel, anticipating her every wish. He loaded her with costly gifts, which the

child, unused to gems and gold, would receive in simple ignorance of their value, wear on the days he came to please him, and lay aside with the careless remark, “They are very pretty, how kind of Darrell” (so, by his wish, she always called him) “to send so far for them for me.”

After his first reception at Woodglen, he had acquiesced without further remonstrance in my decision, that nothing should be settled about Sybil’s marriage until her guardian’s return. It seemed even a kind of relief to him, since he might not carry off his bride at once, to be spared the necessity of any intermediate arrangements. To see her, to hear her, to be with her, was present happiness enough for him. He did not even appear to resent the half suspicion implied in my refusal to allow him the usual privilege of betrothed lovers

to spend hours in uninterrupted converse together. I scarcely felt that his candour had been such as to entitle him to such confidence on my part, nor do I think that there is either delicacy or dignity in the custom which isolates a young girl from her family circle or her domestic occupations, to shut her up alone for hours with a man who was but yesterday a stranger to her. If our dear father permitted such unrestrained intercourse between me and Thorold it was because we had been companions from childhood.

So there was I watchful as an old hen over her solitary chick, which I never suffered to stray out of my sight, though for my own comfort, no less than theirs, I was generally busied with some employment that kept my eyes upon it, and my

ears beyond hearing of their murmured talk.

There was no brotherly or sisterly feeling between Darrell and me. He accepted me as an inevitable necessity, and a disagreeable one, nothing more. He was not bitter, nor insolent, nor discourteous ; he was simply indifferent. He made no attempt to conciliate my good opinion, he was contented with mere toleration, and I tolerated him, and watched. The result of my watchful study of his character was not wholly unfavourable. Some fitfulness of temper and spirits I observed, but it never showed itself in his manner to my sister, and though it did sometimes peep out to me, it was instantly checked by the courtesy of good-breeding, and seemed at worst the passing irritability excited by secret anxiety or annoyance, rather than

constitutional infirmity of temper. Self-indulgent he certainly was, unused to strenuous effort, if not incapable of it, with a quick sensibility, a yielding gentleness which in such natures often conceals the lack of profound sympathy, or force of moral principle. But had his faults been greater, Sybil was too young, her own character as yet too unformed, to guess their existence in one who so worshipped her.

It was now nearly the end of September, in a week the Admiral and his family would return from Ilfracombe, and our few grandes would be gathering for their pheasant-shooting and cub-hunting. Colonel Brereton would be at Plaistow again, as usual, and eyes keener and more practised in the world's ways than mine or my townswomen's, would be taking note of

Mr. Darrell's courtship. Of late, however, he seemed to have got over much of the sensitiveness he had formerly displayed on that subject; and even in the last few days had laid aside his strange reserve, and talked cheerfully of his home at Dyneford, and of the alterations he was making there, to fit it for the reception of his young bride.

One afternoon he came in laughing, it was a rainy day, stormy and cold. I was cowering over a blazing fire, while Sybil stood at the window, glancing out across the garden to see if her lover would come that way, through the woods. But he came through the town this time, and entered with so blithe a step that even Lassie failed to recognise it. He looked so well, too, with that unwonted expression of frank merriment on his laughing features

that I wondered I had never before noticed how handsome he was, and how youthful ! After all, he was little more than a boy.

“ Miss Wharnecliffe,” he cried, “ I met that outrageous old guy, Miss Hogge, just now in the street, and what do you think she said to me ?”

“ Oh, really, it is quite impossible for anyone to predicate what Miss Henny might choose to say to —, well you know you are not one of her favourites.”

“ I fear I have not that honour. Miss Hogge has never forgiven me for declining to visit her in her sty—I beg pardon, her parlour,—to take snuff and cigars with her, as the Doctor and the Curate do. Still she seems to think she is one of my favourites, or at least of Sybil’s, for she said she wished to bespeak my interest with her, to— guess what ?—to name

her one of her bridesmaids ! Fancy Miss Hogge a bridesmaid ! and to such a bride !”

And Darrell went up to Sybil, and I think he passed his arm round her waist, but I cannot be certain because I was so intent on replacing a malevolent-looking cinder that had fallen out of the fire.

“ What could she mean ?” asked Sybil, in astonishment.

“ She meant to annoy me, sweet, by talking about a matter which she fancied we did not wish discussed, but she missed her aim. I care not who knows of my happy fortune *now*. Miss Wharnecliffe, is that old quidnunc of a guardian *never* coming back ? I don’t mean to wait for him much longer.”

“ He will be back in May, that is not so long for *you* to wait, is it, Mr. Darrell ?”

and almost involuntarily I emphasized the “you,” as I thought of the ages *I* had waited for that coming back.

“ Such folly !” he exclaimed, pettishly. “ A fellow who has not seen your sister since she was a baby can have no claim to any voice in her affairs, still less to be the cause of vexatious delays.”

“ What has occurred to make the delay vexatious ? You have not complained of it before ?”

“ No matter what has occurred—I beg your pardon,” he added, recollecting himself. “ Nothing has occurred, but Dyneford wants its mistress, and I think, Sybil, dearest, that if you will consent, and persuade your sister, we might have done with further delays, and let November see me happy !”

Sybil turned her violet eyes wistfully on

me, with a faint blush, but remained silent.

“ Speak, darling,” her lover murmured, “ Sister May can refuse you nothing.”

“ Do not speak, Sybil,” I said, “ for it is always a pain to me to be obliged to refuse you. Dyneford and you, Mr. Darrell, must wait, for I will not give you my treasure on my own and sole responsibility. The ‘old quidnunc’ as you disrespectfully style him, will, I am sure, prove very indulgent; you need not fear him.”

“ I do not fear him,” returned the youth, sullenly; “ I am free now, and care for no guardians, male or female, if only Sybil will be true to me!” and Sybil clasped both her hands on his shoulder, and laid her cheek against them, with a mute gesture of modest tenderness, half child-like, half maidenly, that was pretty to look at;

but I did not look long. I went into the inner drawing-room, and sat down to the piano, and neither saw nor heard what further passed between the young pair; for a good twenty minutes, though all the time I was playing, this thought was running in my head—"Twice he has, apparently unconsciously, laid emphasis on the word *now*—what difficulty has he surmounted that we knew nothing of? He shall not have my pet until her *brother* has demanded, and received, fuller explanations on every point than he has been inclined to offer *me*."

I finished my musical exercise, which I am sure gave great gratification to the assistants who did *not* listen to it, played one or two more pieces—I might have exhausted my whole repertory, they would never have cried "hold, enough!"—then I

closed the piano, put aside my music, and rose, just as Mrs. and Miss Barnes stepped in, despite the pouring rain, upon which Mr. Darrell also rose and took his departure, doubtless cursing the doctor's wife and daughter by all his gods.

Mrs. Barnes looked after him significantly—Miss Barnes looked at Sybil, and simpered, but neither of them ventured on any further demonstration of interest or curiosity, until Mrs. Barnes remarked, with a great affectation of demureness,—

“Mr. Darrell seems quite bewitched with our scenery, doesn't he, Miss Wharnecliffe? He cannot tear himself away from Kelvydon and Lyndon; yet there is much finer scenery, I am told, around his place in Cornwall.”

“In Cornwall, Mrs. Barnes?” I corrected,
“Dyneford is in Somersetshire.”

“So I understand ; but his own place, his principal estate, is in Cornwall—what was the name of the place, Caroline ?”

“Oh, don’t ask me, mamma, I never remember names ; I only know it was somewhere in Cornwall.”

“Who told you so ?” I asked, and stopped, biting my lips with irritation at having betrayed my ignorance of the residence of a youth who had been for more than two months an almost daily visitor at my house.

“Who told me so !” repeated Mrs. Barnes ; “why, it was the doctor, and his authority was the Hon. Mr. Courtenay, Lord Radford’s nephew, a great friend of Mr. Darrell’s. You know my husband is attending Mr. Courtenay for an injury he received last week, out shooting, when his gun burst—it is a mercy it was no

worse——” and here, being discursive in her style of conversation, she wandered a long way off from Mr. Darrell and his property, and could not find her way back until it was time for her to go.

When she was gone I turned to Sybil, who had borne the untimely visit with her usual sweetness.

“Sybil, my child, how long is it since you heard from Laura Tresham?”

“Oh, dear me, May, it is a very long time—three months or more.”

“Who wrote last?”

Lassie coloured slightly. “She did, I believe.”

“Has your friendship cooled, you fickle girl? When you first came here you used to think a ten days’ silence long from Laura.”

An arch smile dimpled on Sybil’s rosy lips.

“I had only one friend then, you know, May. I have to divide my time between two, now.”

“A very unequal division for poor Laura, I fear.”

“I was going to write a long time ago, but”—and Sybil blushed again, and laughed—“well, if you *must* have the truth, Mite, Darrell asked me *not* to do it.”

“Why, in the name of goodness?” and the question was asked in such a startled tone, that my sister, in her turn, looked surprised. Then she came up to me, leaning over me, in her caressing way, as she stood behind my chair, so that I should not look into her face.

“It was very silly of him, of course, he owned it was—it is only you and Jenny Colvin, Mite, who can be always wise,” and the child laughed merrily.

“ Well, but why ?”

“ The ‘ why ’ was that he was jealous ! he could not bear me to have any close friend but himself, and he did not like to be made the subject of correspondence with a girl whom he did not care for.”

“ But you need not have written about him, at all.”

“ So I told him, but he was not satisfied ; so I promised I would not write a single line, unless he gave me leave.”

“ You were a goose, and he is——” but she popped her hand upon my mouth, and stifled the censure. When I could free myself, I went on,—

“ Then as it is more than three months since you heard from Laura, you don’t know how Mary is, nor whether she is married yet ?”

“ Oh, she is certainly not married—am I

not to be bridesmaid ! Indeed, one reason for my not having answered Laura's last letter, was, that the Treshams were returning to England for Mary's marriage, but they were going first to the German springs, and Laura forgot to give me the address."

" I will write to Laura myself, they may be at home now, or, if not, the letter will be forwarded. I want to know how Mary is."

So said I, guilefully, for my anxiety about Miss Tresham was a secondary motive. I thought I might learn something about Mr. Darrell from a probable neighbour of his. Strange that he had never mentioned his connexion with Cornwall when Sybil had told him she had friends there.

I said no more to Lassie, but quietly wrote to Laura, enquiring after Mary, and hinting that if she delayed too long to claim

my sister's good offices as bridesmaid, Mr. Darrell's bride would be the first to ask for hers. I posted my letter, wrote on it "to be forwarded," and waited for the result—a most unexpected result it was!

CHAPTER XIX.

LAURA'S REPLY.

A WEEK or ten days later, I came down to breakfast, contrary to my wont, before Sybil had put in an appearance. I rang the bell for the urn, and stepped out of the open window upon the lawn. From the lattice above a fair fresh face peered down upon me, framed in garlands of sweet clematis ; a snatch of merry song rippled forth from among the flowers, scarcely disturbing the robin that nestled there, so much was it in harmony with its own innocent glee. “ Where the bee sucks,

there lurk I," sang the girl, and I prosaically rejoined, though in my inmost heart I blessed God for her beauty and her gladness,—

"Don't lurk there long, please; the 'owls' don't 'cry' at this hour, and I want my breakfast."

"In one moment, early bird; are you so hungry?—eat this!"

And she tossed out to me a French bonbon, from a box that her lover had brought her one day. Then she vanished within her chamber, and I went back into the parlour, contemplatively munching the chocolate she had thrown to me, as my eyes rested on a letter that lay on Sybil's plate.

"From Jenny Colvin? no, it is a foreign postmark, Laura Tresham's hand. I have a good mind to open it to punish her for coming down so late."

I took up the letter, glanced at the post-mark: "I wonder, has she received my few lines?" Here the urn, which I had set running, and forgotten, poured a scalding stream over the table. I flung down the letter, and flew to the rescue of the table-cloth, and the buttered toast. While I was engaged in repairing the effects of my carelessness, Sybil came in, but I was too appalled at the deluge, to receive her offered kiss.

"There, wait a minute, dear. Oh, what a mess! All the sugar is melting away—and the salt too. Stop, there's a letter from Laura for you. I think she might have had the politeness to write to me."

Sybil took up the letter as I had done, glanced carelessly at it, and laid it aside.

"You miserable Mite, what were you dreaming about, when you let the urn run

over ? When will you be practical like me ? I never commit such follies !”

“ Read your letter that’s a dear ; I want to know how Mary is and if Laura has had my epistle. Hannah ! that girl is deaf. I must fetch her to dry this carpet.”

I left the room, and returned with the maid. For some moments, I was busy helping her to set the things in order and dry the carpet. Sybil offered no assistance, and I did not look towards her. At last, everything being restored to order, and the maid having quitted the room, I began—

“ Now read me what Laura says.” A silence. I looked up, and rose from my seat with an exclamation of alarm.

The letter had dropped from Sybil’s hands ; trembling, as I could see, like a leaf, in spite of the clasp in which she pressed them close together. Her lips quivered, too, and her eyes were turned on me, with

a startled, bewildered look, in which spoke a piteous appeal. I sprang to her side—

“Sybil! my darling—what is it?”

She turned her eyes on the letter, as if it were some reptile that had stung her, and which she feared to touch—and faltered—

“I don’t know, it is some mistake, some dreadful mistake it must be of Laura’s. Oh! May—it never *can* be true?”

I took up the paper and read.

“I am not sure that I ought to write to you, Sybil. I am almost sure that it will do no good. Still, while there is the faintest chance—Oh, Sybil, how could you be so cruel, so treacherous! All that seemed so mysterious in Willy’s conduct of late is explained at last. Miss Wharnecliffe’s letter has explained all. She writes as if she knew nothing—but *you* must know. You must have known that my cousin Wilfred Darrell was Mary’s accepted lover; you

knew that she had loved him all her life, and you have robbed her of him. You have killed her; she had but a slender hold on life, and this bitter wrong will be her death! You are as guilty as if you had stabbed her; you are as guilty as the sinfulest woman who steals another's husband, for he is her promised husband, they were to have been married in October. You knew it and— Oh, Sybil, it is not yet too late! Give him back to Mary! do not commit this great wrong, it will never bring you happiness, no, nor him either. There is some excuse for Willy, for you are so beautiful and he was always weak, but for you—Yet if you could see Mary, you would pity her too much to injure her. She has no beauty like yours—she has no health, no strength, she cannot enjoy life like you. She has only him. And she was so happy, and getting so much stronger, until his letters came

fewer and colder, with excuses and delays. And then, only three weeks ago, those cruel words to mamma, saying, that he saw there was no hope of Mary's permanent restoration to health, and although she would always be dear to him as a cousin, he declined to make a woman, on the brink of the grave, his wife. Mamma has not dared to tell her of this letter yet; she has not even told my father, who is in England, on business. We clung to the hope, that when Wilfred heard how much better and stronger dear Mary is, ever since she came here, and how certainly she will fall back, and pine away, if he forsakes her, he would reconsider his cruel decision. And then comes Miss Wharnecliffe's note, explaining the reason of it all! I have as yet said nothing about it. I have implored mamma to give Wilfred time, to spare Mary, at least until she is strong enough to bear the blow. Oh, Sybil, give

him up to her ! it may not be for long. He is pledged to her—her plighted husband—she only can free him from his promise. Oh, Sybil ! if ever you loved me ! you are so young, so beautiful, you can choose where you will, and there are many who would make you happier than Wilfred, who is selfish and weak. You can never love him as Mary does, who has lived on the thought of him, through so many sad hours in the solitude of a sick chamber, in the weakness of her failing health. Give him back to her, and she shall never know how false he has been ! Even if she knew, she would forgive him.”

Here the passionate remonstrance abruptly ended. It was hurriedly scrawled, and all blotted with tears. Long before I had finished reading it, poor little Sybil was sobbing on my breast. For some minutes I remained silent, pondering on the light thus

thrown on Darrell's conduct. Fascinated by my sister's beauty, he had apparently been led, little by little, to endeavour to win her, careless of an engagement in which, probably, his affections were not deeply interested.

While bound in honour to Miss Tresham he was naturally anxious to conceal his treachery from the world, and from me, from whom he must have instinctively felt he would meet with no indulgence. Compelled at length to take some decisive step, he had made his cousin's ill-health the pretext for breaking off his engagement to her—and hence his exultation, at what he thought his recovered freedom! And it is my ignorance, my helplessness that has, perhaps, sacrificed my darling's happiness, to the weakness of this selfish coward! Oh, Thordold, if you had but come back to us this spring!

CHAPTER XX.

FOR WHOM THE SHADOW ?

WE did not expect a visit from Darrell that day, as he had gone up to town a few days before, without leaving an address, as his stay there, he said, would be brief. Nor would Sybil have cared to write to him ; she had not the pen of a ready writer. Her correspondence had been entirely limited to a few girlish scrawls to her school-mates during their holidays, and she cared little for that mode of expressing her thoughts and feelings. Of course, had she seemed to wish it, I

would have found out some method of transmitting a letter to her lover, though I had sent it to meet him at the railway station, but she said no word on the subject. When I had soothed her into some degree of calmness, she went upstairs to her own room, and presently came down again in her walking-dress. Her veil was down, to hide her swollen eye-lids,—poor child,—and she came up to me and kissed me, saying in a low voice—

“I am going for a long walk into the wood, dear. Don’t be frightened if I go further than I mean, and am not home for dinner.”

“But, my darling—alone?”

She stopped my remonstrance with another kiss.

“Let me go, please—let me go, quite alone; it will be good for me.”

I offered no further opposition, and as she went out, she turned back to say, in a still lower tone—

“Please write at once to Laura for me, and tell her—I did not know—how could I know?—she never called him anything but ‘Willy,’—how could I ever guess—”

She stopped.

“And is this all I am to say to her, my love?”

“All, as yet,” she replied. “Surely, May, he must not be condemned unheard.”

And she left the room, as if unwilling to say more.

I wrote a few hurried lines to Laura, fully exculpating Sybil from any share in Darrell’s wrong to Mary, and assuring her that no influence of mine should be wanting to induce him to retract it. More I could not say, for Sybil’s manner gave me no clue

to what was likely to be her ultimate decision. To many to whom the care of young girls was entrusted, it would have seemed my duty to exercise my authority if necessary, to compel my sister to act in accordance with my own views of right and justice ; but I did not feel it so then—nor do I now. Sybil was no longer a child, but a woman, like myself, — with the same sacred strength on which to lean in a woman's weakness,—the same sacred consolation to appeal to in a woman's sorrow.

If I had committed a fault in admitting Darrell too incautiously to our intimacy, it was an error of worldly inexperience for which I could not deeply blame myself ; but from the moment I had permitted Sybil to receive him as her future husband, I had given up all claim to interfere between them. She alone might judge of

the wrong he had committed, and whether or not it should part them for ever. She alone might weigh his defence, and pronounce his sentence. Earnestly I hoped—fervently I prayed—that womanly justice and generosity might prevail in her over selfish passion ; and still I trembled for her. She was yet so young, so untried, that if she should fail, I might pity and grieve for her, but could scarcely condemn her. And I stood apart, recognising the truth that for beings gifted with ordinary intelligence and moral sensibility, there are battles which must be fought alone and unaided, before their own conscience and their God.

It was nearly sunset when the girl returned, looking tired and pale. She took, with her usual gentle docility, the refreshment I pressed upon her, and read, without

comment, the letter I showed her that I had written to Miss Tresham. Then she lay back on the cushions of the sofa, sighing wearily, and closed her eyes as if to sleep, while I drew down the blinds, that the low light might not annoy her, and took my work to the little table by her side. Presently she fell asleep, and I laid down my sewing, to sit and watch her. My poor little pet!—how sad and strange to me was the change in her lovely face beneath the shade of her first sorrow. Her lips quivered and twitched,—and once, when the shrill scream of the railway-whistle announced the arrival of a train at the station at the end of the street, she shuddered,—half-opened her eyes, and moaned faintly. Then she fell asleep again, and I hushed my breathing lest I should disturb her, until the golden sun-light

faded, and the twilight paled and darkened, and then the door opened softly. I turned, and saw Wilfred Darrell standing on the threshold.

Instantly Sybil awoke, and started up as if to spring towards him ; but recollecting herself, she shrank back again, and buried her face in the sofa-cushions. Whether so unusual a reception startled her lover, or whether his guilty conscience gave the alarm, I know not ; he paused—and cried, in a tone of forced gaiety—

“ Miss Wharnecliffe,—has Sybil been naughty, that you keep her a prisoner in the corner there ? or—” and he took a step forward, — “ you are not ill, my dearest ? ”

I am sure my voice was not as steady as I could have wished it, as I answered—

“ She has had a shock to-day, Mr. Dar-

rell, in a letter from your cousin, Laura Tresham."

"Good heavens!" he cried, — "is Mary—?"

Then he checked himself, and there was a dead silence.

Sybil raised herself from the sofa, and taking Laura's letter from the table at her side, held it out to her lover. He took it without a word, and went to the window, as if to catch the fading light to read it by. He was a long time about it, as it seemed to me—in the stillness of the room, scarcely broken by the low panting sigh that every now and then came, as if involuntarily, from Sybil, and at every sigh Darrell turned his head quickly towards her, and his cousin's letter rustled in his hand.

At last he laid it down, and addressed me.

"I must confess, Miss Wharnecliffe, I am very sorry that you or Sybil should have learnt anything of my *past* relations with my cousin; but you must not mind what Laura says. Mary is not likely to be long-lived, poor girl, but she will not die for love of me."

And he ended with a careless laugh, which would have revolted me, had it not evidently been so forced.

Then Sybil spoke, in a low tremulous voice.

"Darrell," she said, "why have you deceived me, why have you involved me in the guilt of this great wrong? I never did, never will, commit it knowingly."

"What do you mean, Sybil?" he enquired, with an impatience, in which there was mingled a keen alarm. "I have never wronged *you*, I have never deceived *you*.

I am yours, wholly yours, from the first hour we met; it is true, that before I saw you, I had suffered myself to be persuaded by my uncle into an engagement to his daughter. It was a mere family transaction of interest on his part. But when I found that I loved you, as I never had loved her, that I could never make her happy, I gave her back her freedom, and claimed my own. You have nothing at all to do with that. I am yours, and yours only—wholly and for ever."

"Tell me one thing," said my sister earnestly, "let me hear from your own lips, whether or not, Laura's accusation against you is true. Were you engaged to Mary Tresham, at the time when—" She faltered and stopped, and then resumed more firmly, "Were you engaged

to her all the time you were visiting here, until a fortnight ago?"

"I repeat," he answered sullenly, "that you have no right to question me concerning my past relations with my cousin, since they are finally broken off."

"They are not, and never can be broken off without her consent," said Sybil, "and you say truly, I have no right to question you—no right to you at all. Go away, please!" she added, in a tone of piteous entreaty. "Oh, go back, and comfort Mary before it is too late; tell him to go, May, I am so tired."

Thus authorised I took up my parable.

"I echo my sister's request, Mr. Darrell, there is nothing that can be added to what she has said. Since *she* does not reproach you, I will not. We shall both, I think, forgive you more easily than you will

forgive yourself—I hope so, for your sake ;
please go away.”

“ You were never my friend, Miss Wharnecliffe,” rejoined the culprit, bitterly, “ it is you who have dictated this dismissal to Sybil, I will not receive it from you. Oh, Sybil, my darling, my only love, you cannot throw me from you now—for you love me, dear—I have won you, and I will hold you, we cannot be parted now.”

Very low, sad and tender, breathed the girl’s reply. “ I do love you, Darrell—I did—but I have no right, I did not know—O, my God,” she murmured, almost inaudibly, “ do not let me sin against *her*, against Thee.”

“ Sybil,” cried her lover, and the real anguish in his voice melted even me. “ Sybil ! do not wreck both our lives for a mere scruple ! what is Mary to you, that

you should let her come between us ? we are all the world to each other. Yes," he continued, more passionately, "you are my world, my soul's life, my heaven ! Will you make existence a hell to me, as it will be without you ? I will make you my wife to-morrow, Sybil, and no one then will pretend to part us. Come to me, my dearest, my treasure, and let all this misery be a forgotten dream."

He held out his arms to her, she rose, and made a wavering movement, as if to go to him, already his eyes brightened with triumph. "Come," he said, "bring my life all its sunshine."

"And leave the shadow upon Mary's," I whispered.

Sybil turned, and threw herself, not on her lover's breast, but on mine.

"Send him away!" she wailed plaintively, "Oh, May, I suffer so."

I folded her closely in my arms, and addressed Darrell.

"There is no use in prolonging this painful scene, Mr. Darrell, I must beg you to leave us."

But he remained rooted to the ground.

"Then we must withdraw; come, Sybil."

"I am going," he said, hurriedly, "but this is no final parting, Sybil, my sweet; give me your hand, at least, dear." She held out her hand, without lifting her head from my shoulder. He held it a moment, kissed it passionately, and let it fall; then, after one more long gaze at her averted head, he bowed haughtily to me, and left the house.

CHAPTER XXI.

“COMING EVENTS.”

THE next day, I had an engagement to dinner at Plaistow Manor. It was to be a very grand party, in honour of no less a person than Lord Radford. I knew well I was only invited to “make music” for them in the evening, as neither of the young ladies were great musicians, and might, besides, turn their time to better account, Mrs. Stacy might have thought. Sybil was not included in the invitation, Mrs. Stacy always persisting in the assumption that she was not yet

"out." Mr. Darrell, I knew, had been invited, and had declined, and I suspected that one reason for his refusal had been the hope of having his lady-love all to himself for the few minutes that might elapse between my stepping into the fly for my seven miles' drive and the arrival of Miss Boyden, Mrs. Barnes' governess, after the children's early tea, to spend the evening with Lassie. That was all over now, of course, and I would have sent an excuse to Plaistow, and remained with my sister, but she would not hear of it. She even declined my proposal to put off Miss Boyden, saying, with the sweet unselfishness I so loved in her—"I am very well, Mite, I am quite able to entertain Lucy Boyden, and poor girl, she has so few holidays, it would be unkind to disappoint her of one." It did not seem

to her, that she had a right to withdraw from her little social duties, to brood and weep over her own private grief, or that she was making any admirable sacrifice in refraining from such self-indulgence, and certainly I did not think that the sorrow was less deep, or the pang less real for that. I left her without anxiety, feeling that her interest in others would be the best balm for a wound which girls of less healthy imaginations would strive to keep open as long as possible. It was better for her that none of her usual employments should be suspended; for some time to come, they would doubtless lose their zest, but they would be fulfilled with less subsequent effort, if from the first uninterrupted, and my own experience in past years had taught me how healing is the almost

imperceptible influence of daily interests and cares.

The party at Plaistow was sure to be as splendid—and as stupid—as it could be made by costly dishes, flowers, and flunkies, silver epergnes, glittering plate and candelabra, and no other brilliancy. I was right in my prevision.

If Mrs. Stacy had merely wished to help old Lord Radford to pass a pleasant evening, she might have succeeded, even with only such materials as could have been collected in the neighbourhood of a little provincial town. There was Mr. Pitt, of Kelvydon Grange, of good old yeoman stock, though not one of the "county families," a man deeply versed in antiquarian and archæological lore, who knew every stone and mound within fifty miles, and could tell you what

was, or ought to be, inside of it. There was Dr. Barnes, who had been an army surgeon in India, at the time of the mutiny, and could make your hair stand on end (if his lordship would have enjoyed the sensation) by tales of the horrors he had witnessed, and the perils he had escaped there. Or, if his lordship's tastes were bucolic, there was Mr. Walton, of Willow Dale, who was known to all frequenters of agricultural shows as the wearer (metaphorically) of many a civic wreath, such as hang at Christmas tide upon massive joints of prize sheep and oxen, and whose pretty wife could play much better than I did, and sing like an actress, as some said she had been, and who was really a very fascinating little woman. But, oh dear! none of these good people belonged to the elite of our neighbourhood, and of course it

would be against all precedent to suppose that a viscount, (I think he was,) could condescend to be entertained in the society of any but the very élite.

So there they were, eight of them ; the cream of Plaistow society, within dining distance, could be skimmed to no greater result. There was Sir Lucius Forbes, an old gentleman who had outlived all his ideas,—if he ever had any,—but that of the comparative excellence of his friends' *cuisines*, and confined himself, even on that subject, to a mute though very evident appreciation of it. Lady Forbes was stout, stately, and stolid, and her daughter, a faded, insipid coquette of forty, had lost with her beauty all her power to charm. There were Mr. and the Hon. Mrs. Stanley Clarke, newly married people, with nothing particular about them

but good looks and good manners,—or what Mrs. Stacy called “good style,”—and a brother of the pretty bride’s, who possessed in no remarkable degree any of these good things. There were the wealthy Halls, of Forest Dell : he had married her for her money ; she had an impediment in her speech, poor thing, but that could not signify much to him, as he was nearly stone deaf, though their combined infirmities prevented them from contributing greatly to the general enjoyment. Lord Radford and his nephew, the Hon. Mr. Courtenay, a lad of eighteen, with my insignificant self, made up the list of Mrs. Stacy’s guests, besides those staying in the house, among whom of course was the inevitable Colonel Brereton, who had returned to Plaistow within the last day or two.

I hope Lord Radford enjoyed the party

rather more than I did, or he must have wished himself at home and in bed before the *entrées* were handed round. But to be sure I knew the capabilities of the assembled guests, and that nothing cheerful or instructive could be expected from them. Lord Radford might have been sustained for awhile by fallacious hopes, or was more inured than I was to the dreary inanity of a country (state) dinner party. The youth to whose tender mercies I was committed,—a college friend of young Stacy's,—found me silent, I suppose, and turned his attention to Constance, who sat on his left hand, and then, as was my wont, I began to dream. There are few more favourable conditions for dreaming than a well-lighted room, full of the "murmurous stir" of people engrossed in their own occupations, heedless of your presence or unconscious

of it. So I sat and dreamed on, until suddenly through my musings there thrilled a name that ever breathed or whispered through every dream of mine.

“ Thorold Challoner ?” said Lord Radford, in answer to some remark of Stanley Clarke’s, that I had not heard, “ yes, it is his brother ; do you know him ?”

“ I knew him years ago, a little,” answered Mr. Clarke, “ but I came home shortly after he went out ; when I heard you name Sir Franklin Challoner, I thought it was some relation of his.”

“ Well, you can resume your acquaintance soon, for Thorold is coming home ; he has made a large fortune, I hear, and his uncle, for whom he made it, is dead, and has left it all to him.”

“ There are not many such grateful uncles,” observed young Courtenay, pen-

sively, "at least I have not such a one."

"Make a large fortune for me, Courtenay," laughed Lord Radford, "and I will leave it you when I have done with it."

"Sir Franklin Challoner?" said Mrs. Stacy, "was he not married to Lady Harriet Lester? I used to meet her at Torquay before she married. I daresay she would scarcely remember now"—(she might be excused if she did not, since the "meeting" Mrs. Stacy referred to was only on the staircase of a lodging-house!)—"she had a sister with her, Lady—Lady Emily—"

"Lady Emily Knyvett," answered Lord Radford. "She is a widow now; her husband went out with her to New Zealand not three years ago and died

there. I hear she is coming back to Hawkeshurst in the spring, under Mr. Challoner's escort."

"Mr. Challoner," laughed Stanley Clarke, "returns under happy auspices: with a large fortune of his own, and a gay widow under his charge."

"Well," said Lord Radford, "I rather think he is a married man. Courtenay, is Thorold Challoner married?"

"I really can't say," answered his nephew languidly. "I never heard of him till Lady Harriet said that her sister was coming home with him in the spring. I don't think anyone knows much about him; if a fellow disappears for ten years to the Antipodes he must expect to be forgotten."

At that moment Lord Radford's eyes casually met mine, and I felt impelled to

answer his enquiry. "Mr. Challoner is not married, Lord Radford—" and then feeling the colour rise to my face, as Mrs. Stacy glanced with some surprise towards me, I added, "Mr. Challoner is an old friend of my—family. He is my sister's guardian. He was not married last midsummer at least."

"If he is not married next midsummer," laughed Stanley Clarke, "after a three months' travelling with Lady Emily Knyvett, either he is invincible or *she* has lost her cunning, or does not think him worth trying for, which is not likely if he is as rich as they say; it would be a nice little family arrangement."

I had been looking earnestly on the pattern of my plate, trying to chide back the treacherous colour in my cheek. I now glanced up, and met Colonel Brereton's

eyes fixed significantly on me. Of course I blushed again, deeper than ever, and it was quite a relief to me that, at that moment, Mrs. Stacy rose and I was swept away in her train.

We had not been long in the drawing-room before she came up to me, with unusual affability, and sat down beside me.

“How is Sybil, Miss Wharnecliffe? I have not seen her for so long; young girls are out of place at formal dinner-parties, so I did not ask you to bring her, although I fear that we have lost Mr. Darrell by not inviting her. You know there is a little gossip on that subject—but you are quite right to pay no attention to it,—Sybil is so young!”

I replied as indifferently as I could. “The gossip, whatever it is, will soon come to an end, Mrs. Stacy, as Mr. Darrell is

leaving Lyndon, and we shall hear no more of him."

But the lady's interest in Sybil was a mere feint.

"So, so," she answered, "quite right. I understand—yes, yes. And so Mr. Challoner is an old friend of yours?—how strange!—and dear Lady Harriet——"

"I do not know Lady Harriet Challoner," I answered coldly. "I have not seen Sir Franklin since he was a boy, and not much of him then; his brother Thorold lived near us with his uncle, and was named guardian to Sybil by her father when she was quite a baby."

"Ah! you do not know dear Lady Harriet? I was in hopes you could tell me something of her, it is so very long since we met. Oh, dear! there is Mrs. Stanley Clarke signing to me; excuse me,

one minute." And away she glided, evidently considering that since I did not know "dear Lady Harriet," I might be left to my original insignificance. I smiled softly to myself.

Lady Harriet Challoner, my noble sister-in-law that is to be! How will she forgive me for spoiling that "nice little family arrangement," and crossing the path of the gay widow? I am not jealous of you, Lady Emily Knyvett, I will trust my Thorold with you for a voyage all round the world; you may exert all your fascinations, they will be baffled by a spell you know not of—the spell of a proved constancy—and that this link should bind him to a little, quiet, undemonstrative "Mite," whom nobody thinks worth noticing! Ah, poor Mary Tresham! poor Sybil! would that *your* lover had been half so true.

When the gentlemen came in, Lord Radford came up to me, and enquired after his beautiful little friend ; then the allusion was again repeated, that showed how vain had been Darrell's sly caution.

"Not very well ? nothing very serious, or you would not be here. Our friend Darrell returned from town late last night ; I saw him this morning, and he was very gloomy indeed, and talks of leaving Lyndon immediately. Something wrong, I fear ; but I hope, as regards your sweet sister, it is only a summer shower."

I replied, evasively, "Summer showers are heavy while they last—I have had my flower-beds spoiled for the season with such. You cannot guess what grief that is to gardeners like Sybil and me, Lord Radford."

He understood my avoidance of the sub-

ject he had alluded to, and dropped it at once.

“And how is that merry old lady I met with you, the last time I saw you here, Miss—Miss—?”

“Miss Hogge,” I smiled; “she is very well, but she is not seen out much when the days begin to shorten.”

Here Mr. Courtenay, who was listlessly conversing, or being conversed with, by Maria Gibson, turned round, with something like animation,—

“Are you talking of Miss Hogge? isn’t she capital fun? Brereton took me with him to see her last week, Mervyn was there; she gave us some first-rate cigars, however she got them, and kept us laughing till our sides ached.”

“You should not laugh at a person with such a melancholy infirmity,” observed

Miss Gibson, mildly reproving; "poor woman, her brain is quite unsettled; not exactly mad, perhaps, but—"

"Mad!" repeated the young man, "if all mad people were as jolly as she is, by Jove, I'd like to have a *pied-à-terre* in Bedlam; and as for laughing at her, one might get the worst in that, I fancy; we laughed *with* her, not *at* her."

"*Gentlemen*," observed Mrs. Stacy, with a severe emphasis on the masculine noun—"gentlemen are amused at Miss Henny's eccentricities, but I observe they do not seek to enjoy them in the society of the *ladies* of their families. Constance, my love, we are waiting for some music. Mr. Courtenay, if you can be consoled for Miss Hogge's absence, my daughter will try to make you forget it, in one of your favourite songs."

So the youth led Miss Stacy to the piano, and stood behind her while she sang, and stifled so many yawns while he turned over her music, that I, who watched him, could not help suspecting that if he had had his wicked will, he would gladly have exchanged the refinements of Mrs. Stacy's society for a good laugh at her and it in the company of the eccentric *Bashanite*, and I believe he had that enjoyment a few days later.

Meanwhile Colonel Brereton watched his opportunity and stole up to me, murmuring archly as he bent over me,—

“Are you of Mr. Courtenay's opinion, Sister May, that ‘if a fellow disappears for ten years, he must expect to be forgotten?’”

I looked hastily in his face—not a shade of jealousy or regret was visible

there—and, still faintly blushing, I returned his smile, as I said, "If you have stolen my secret, Colonel Brereton, at least keep it loyally."

CHAPTER XXII.

HENNY AS AN OCULIST.

A WEEK passed by, but nothing was seen or heard of Wilfred Darrell, nor did any letter from Laura Tresham reach Woodglen. There was nothing surprising in that. She had rescued her charming brother-in-law for his rightful claimant, what could she say that would not be an offence to Mary, or a wound to her innocent rival ? In such a case as this, if ever, “silence was gold.” But the sudden hush was trying to Sybil, and she began to droop. She did not name her lost lover, she made

no complaint, she even made faint, piteous efforts to seem as usual, "like the stag that goes on grazing with the great deep gun wound in his neck, then reels with sudden moan." She would sit down at her piano, and play the preludes to her accustomed songs, and even sing a few notes, and then break off suddenly, rise, and go into the garden, where I should see her kneeling on the grass, weeding the flower-beds, on which glittered, not the calm, soft dews of Heaven, but earth's bitter dew of tears. Or she would take her work into the back drawing-room—Sybil was fond of her needle,—but for such a deft little sempstress her thread would knot very often, and her eyes wandered to the door whenever the housebell rang, or a footstep paused in the street, yet, when visitors were announced, before they had crossed the

threshold, she had slipped through the other door and vanished.

Evidently she had expected some "last words" from Darrell, and could not reconcile herself to so abrupt a parting as final. I began to tremble for her, lest after all, her strength—she was so young—should prove unequal to a sacrifice which many women would have refused to make—lest the weak heart's casuistry should prevail over right principle and unselfish feeling. What should I do if Darrell were to come back, and she yielded, after all? What *could* I do but pity her, grieve for her—scarcely feel that I had any right to blame her—I who never had—never, thank God, could have—any experience of a struggle like hers?

During all that week I kept beside her, not with any idea of interposing between

her and Wilfred, should he re-appear, for I did not at all expect that he would show himself at Woodglen any more; but to guard her from any danger of random wounds from chance visitors, whom, in my absence, she must have received, and partly from disinclination to leave her, since she could not be persuaded to accompany me beyond the garden. When Sunday came round, she went as usual to her class in Mr. Mervyn's school, and to her place in church among the choir, and, as her pure voice rose in the anthem, perhaps no ear less watchful than mine would have detected the new sadness in it.

Some whisper may have gone abroad, such thin walls had Kelvydon! for I fancied the young curate's dark eyes followed us down the aisle, with a sorrowful, sympathising interest, instead of turning away,

as they had lately done, when Mr. Darrell waited near the door to join us. More than one damsel, too, glanced at my sister, from Lord Radford's seat, where to-day, there were none but strangers. All this might have been my fancy, still, when the afternoon service was over, I felt an irresistible longing to know what the Kelvydon people said or thought about Mr. Darrell's movements this last week, and from whom could I learn it, but from Miss Henny, who always contrived to hear everything, as she sat in her den, as if it had been the Ear of Dionysius ?

“ You won't mind my leaving you for an hour, Lassie ? I want to see how Miss Henny is. She was not in church to-day.”

Sybil glanced up that sidelong bird-like look of hers, but the dimples now only trembled, that used to dance, in her smile.

"Go, Mite, and have your heart's content of gossip, which you love, I do believe, as dearly as the *Bashanite* herself does. Don't hurry home for me, I am not afraid of ghosts ; Woodglen is not haunted."

And then the sweet face saddened, as if she guessed that the ghosts I feared for her were the ghosts of dead hopes, that would haunt her long, poor child !

So I went away to Miss Henny, who received me in her sanctum, sitting on her abominable old coffin, and glaring at me like an old ghost. She held a number of a "periodical" in her hand, and though she looked up from its pages to nod to me, and even half closed it, she kept her fingers between the leaves, and gazed at me, with a "what do you want here" expression that would have embarrassed me, had I not known her ways so well.

Thought I, she is in a horrid temper this evening because I did not go to her, after the dinner party at Plaistow, and tell her "all about" it, and considers my not having done so, as a defection to the enemy !

While she was in that mood nothing could be done with her. If she possessed any intelligence of interest to me, she would glory in withholding it, or, worse still, she was capable of inventing some fiction for the sole purpose of fooling me.

There was only one means of propitiating her, and I blush to say, I took it. I offered up my little sister's secret to her, by way of peace-offering, and, by the avidity with which she pounced upon it, I at once perceived that my indiscretion would go unrewarded, and that she had heard nothing at all !

"And so this Darrell is another woman's

lover? But if he gives her up, what will Sybil care? Do women ever feel any pity, any remorse, for such wrongs? Believe me, May Wharnecliffe, in love, as in everything else in this life, it is ever the weakest to the wall—who ever turns back to lift a fallen rival?"

She spoke so bitterly that I was half frightened, yet I defended my pet.

"You wrong my sister, Miss Henny, she has no thought of injuring Miss Tresham; she has dismissed young Darrell, and they have parted for ever."

"Parted, have they? where is he gone to?"

"I don't know; I have heard nothing of him for more than a week."

"A week is not long; I am sure he has not gone back to Miss Tresham, for I saw him myself last night."

"You did?" I asked, startled.

“ Yes, I saw him, but I don’t think he saw me. It was late, nearly my supper time, and little Tommy Philpott came to my window, crying and hallooing, that his father was killing his mammy, would I go and stop him. No great matter if he *did* kill her, a fool like that, who lets herself be kicked and beaten, when, if she’d turn and throw a saucepan, or a table-knife at him, the great hulking coward would fall on his knees and howl for mercy! However, I went—and I speedily restored peace.”

“ Oh, Miss Henny ! how dared you venture into such a den, and at such an hour, too ?”

“ Pooh—the den, as you call it, is as familiar to me as my own parlour, and what did the hour signify ? I just took the cayenne pepper, and emptied it into my snuff-box. The brute had got the woman

down, and was pommelling her with his fists, while every now and then, he lashed out, with his heels behind, at a pitiful soul of a neighbour, who was trying to hold him back by his coat-skirts. He looked back at me—the better to aim a curse, I suppose—and I aimed the contents of my box—snuff and cayenne—into his eyes. He was blinded for some while, at least. The neighbours picked up the wife, and I walked away, having conquered the giant, like David, with my sling and my stone. I learned that trick from a man in the street I saw once parting two fighting dogs. In such a case, you, May, would have tried entreaty. Mr. Mervyn would have tried reproof, and both of you would have been kicked for your pains. Try my mixture, say I!"

"But Mr. Darrell?" I asked anxiously, though I could not help laughing at Miss

Henny's novel interpretation of an "armed neutrality."

"Mr. Darrell? I am coming to him; I came upon him, I should say, just at the corner; he had crossed the bridge. It was dusk, but light enough for me to recognise him, though he brushed past me, without looking at me. No doubt he had been hovering about in the wood, looking for Sybil in the garden or at her window, or where he might catch her alone. 'All's not lost that's in danger,' thinks Mr. Darrell, he knows what he is about. The girl might say, 'go' with you looking on, she might even mean it, in the excitement of the moment, but after the fever-fit comes the chill. He will hold out his arms to her then, and she will fly to him, as the fledgeling flies back to its warm nest and its mother's wing—it is the cold—the cold,

May Wharnecliffe, that is so hard to bear."

And Miss Henny shivered slightly, and turned to her book again. I sat silent, musing on the unpleasant communication she had made, and on the effect it would produce on Sybil, if she heard that her lost lover was still lingering near her. But perhaps she would never hear it. He might have been taking his farewell look at Wood-glen when Miss Henny saw him. He might be far away now—on his way to Mary Tresham.

Here Miss Henny began to mutter and murmur, but on looking towards her, I saw that she was absorbed in her book, and had forgotten me and my affairs. I would have stolen softly away, without disturbing her, but while I stood irresolute, she let it fall, folding her hands on her lap, and gazing

straight before her, with wide dreaming eyes.

“So,” she said, “some one in the last generation said, that the Apostles were tried for perjury, and acquitted. This generation of ours summons Christ Himself to their tribunal. What if He answers, and appears?”

To such a question who could dare reply?

She went on—“How would they look for Him to answer, they who say they believe in Him? Mr. Mervyn would say, at the head of His church, I suppose—a train of glorified bishops and church dignitaries, with each his controversial writings in his hand. My friend, the Baptist, expects Him in power, which with him means wrath. ‘Deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.’ In power! But that is so easy! A God of Almighty Power all can

conceive—the revelation we question, the revelation we need, is of Infinite Love ! ‘Deeply wailing,’—Oh, God ! it will be indeed a New Song to us in which is no note of sadness !”

She was evidently unconscious of my presence, and I stood silent and awe-struck.

As I watched her black eyes gleam beneath her knitted brows, and all her face kindle with strong, but suppressed emotion, the unattractiveness, the quaint grotesqueness, seemed to fall from her like a mask, leaving only the dignity and pathos of a struggling, suffering, human soul !

Softly as I tried to steal to the door, she heard me, and looked sharply round.

“Are you there still, May Wharnecliffe ?
Don’t look so frightened ; I shan’t eat you.
Come here,—with your shy, wistful blue

eyes, that seem always yearning for some unattainable bliss, above, or beyond you."

"Might not we read that look in all eyes, Miss Henny?"

"I don't know about all eyes ; my little housemaid had it in hers for a week or two, when her sweetheart left her ; but it is gone since he came back, as yours will ; for after all, May, the good you pine for is your lover's return, and you need not have pined for that, if you had taken my Johnnie instead of waiting for that New Zealand savage, who thinks more of counting his sheepskins than of claiming you."

"Good night, Miss Henny."

"Stop a minute, if you don't mind going home across the bridge, I'll walk with you so far. I want to see if my practice as an oculist has been successful in making Mr.

Philpott see that it is not his interest to thump his wife. She is not his wife, to be sure ; but that makes the wrong more flagrant, as for all I know, (or he, perhaps,) she may be somebody else's."

"It is nearly dark, Miss Hogge,—you will never venture, at such an hour, into such a ruffian's lair ?"

"Why not, my dear? I've known Thomas Philpott from a lad ; he don't beat anyone but his 'missis,'—he'll neither kill me nor kiss me. But I shan't take you with me ; young women are out of place in such districts, the language there is too emphatic for good taste. If you fall ill of a fever, you might repeat it in delirium, and then Kelvydon would hold up its hands, and say, 'Where could Miss Wharnecliffe have been brought up ?'"

"But Maria Gibson goes there sometimes?"

"Maria Gibson!"—(with a sniff.) "Yes, to 'visit her poor,' as she says. *Her* poor! As if she were talking of her pigs or her fowls! I wish she could hear their remarks on her, behind her back, she would not be so proud of her influence over them."

"Can you not impart the secret of *your* influence to her, Miss Hogge?—or to me? I should be very grateful for it."

"There is no secret in it, child,—the cottagers are fond of me, because I am one of themselves. I am 'old Miss Henny' to them, and no fine lady. I live among them,—their children play on my doorstep,—their boys peep in at my windows. I am not too refined to be able to look at things from their own point of view. I have no need to 'talk down' to them as

Maria does. And then — ” continued Henny, with an air of profound disgust— “ to see her dress, when she visits her ‘district,’ as she calls it; the oldest and shabbiest clothes she has ! Nothing offends them more than that ! They know quite well that she goes to see you, or even me, in ribbons and dresses of the newest fashion, and she goes to *them* in such bonnets and shawls as my housemaid wouldn’t wear on Sundays.”

“ But that is to discourage the love of dress in them.”

“ And they simply believe that she is afraid to trust her dainty sashes and flounces on their dirty staircases or doubtful chairs, and naturally resent the implied contempt of their ‘interiors.’ Besides, the gratification of studying their visitors’ grand toilettes is one of the compen-

sations for the annoyance of the intrusion. That is not peculiar to their class, I fancy."

"If they would be satisfied with the amusement of looking at them, and not make themselves ridiculous by trying to imitate them."

"There it is again! You fancy—even you, May, that they understand your real interest in them, when you beg Lucy Jordan to wear a plain dress, and a ribbon in her bonnet, instead of a flaunting tunic, and a tawdry feather in her hat? Whereas, she and her mother attribute the remonstrance to pure jealousy, lest, by too close an imitation of Sybil's dress, she might rival—as they think she well can—Sybil's beauty. The question of taste is a dead letter to them; but the idea of rivalry and

jealousy is familiar to every female breast. Besides, though it may be difficult to *form* their taste, it is harder still to *force* it ; but we part here. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIII.

TEMPTATION.

I LEFT Miss Henny, as she desired, at the corner of the narrow, dirty alley that called itself a street, close by the bridge that spanned our little river. Crossing this bridge, I had only a few hundred yards to go along the pathway bordering the wood that swept down nearly to the edge of the brook, and then I came to my own little private bridge, leading into the garden of Woodglen. It was at the extreme end of the garden, close to a rustic summer-house, built of wood and

moss, from which a grass path went straight to the lawn, before the drawing-room door, between two rows of arbutus and laurel trees.

The gate fastened with a secret spring, rather a useless precaution, as any boy could have jumped over it, or, in most seasons, walked through the shallow, pebbly stream, to the lawn itself. It was now nearly dark, and as I was feeling for the spring, a man's voice fell on my ear, speaking earnestly close beside me. I started, listened, and paused. The summer-house faced the lawn, but had it been otherwise, it was too dark for me to distinguish anyone in it, or even to see that any one was in it. But it was not necessary that I should see the speaker, for I at once recognised Darrell's voice. Doubtless he had watched me leave the cottage, and

had seized his opportunity to surprise Sybil alone—just like his sly ways !

I stood irresolute what to do. Should I go in and break off the *tête-à-tête*? No, let him say out his say ; it would be best so. I had refrained from any attempt to influence my sister, and it would be well that he should see that her decision was hers alone.

But what if his influence prevailed ? Even so, it would be better that what was to be done should be done quickly—Mary and her friends should not be kept longer in uncertainty.

I disliked playing the involuntary eavesdropper, though in such a case, Jenny Colvin would have considered that she was merely performing a necessary duty. Should I turn back ? The night was dark, the wood was lonely. What if Mr. Thomas

Philpott came reeling along the path, having had an extra glass of gin, by way of aiding the effect of Miss Henny's collyrium?

Besides, Mr. Darrell's words were distinctly audible in the stillness of the night, and I could at least keep off less discreet listeners, who might chance to pass by. I was very sure that the meeting was none of Lassie's contrivance, and I felt very little remorse at being a witness to Mr. Darrell's manœuvre, in despite of him—so I stood still.

Sybil spoke, but her words were inaudible. Wilfred answered eagerly,—

“ You do me but justice, Sybil, my dearest; indeed, indeed, I never meant any wrong to Mary or to you. I loved my cousin as a sister, no more; I should never have thought of her as a wife, if my uncle

had not pressed the marriage on me. I had never loved any woman better, for I never knew what love was until I saw you. Do not move away, Sybil—do not stand so far from me—can a few days change you so? Only a week ago you told me you were mine, mine only, mine wholly, my darling, you cannot retract the gift of a heart at will."

"I must not listen to you, Darrell," she answered, sadly; "you should not have surprised me here alone. I entreat you to leave me. Every word you say is treason to your plighted wife."

"I tell you," he said, passionately, "that the promise was wrung from me—I could not fulfil it now if I would. Would you force me to lie to God and her?"

"You need not lie to her—tell her the

truth—she will forgive you ; if I were in her place *I would forgive you.*"

" And if she will not forgive me, Sybil, will you take me back ?"

A silence. I could feel my heart beat with breathless anxiety for her reply. It came gentle, but firm.

" No, Darrell ; while Mary lives she has a claim on you, whether you return to her or not—I will be no barrier between her and you. But she will forgive you, for—" and here the girl's voice broke into a sudden wail—" for, oh Darrell, she loves you !"

" And you too, Sybil !" cried her lover, exultingly, " you love me, and you cannot hide it, although you shrink from me, although you will not so much as leave your little hand in mine ; if you listened to your own heart you would come to me ;

it is only your sister's prudery that keeps you back—yet, if I have wronged my cousin, it was all owing to her."

I wondered how he would make that out, and so did Sybil, for she uttered an exclamation of incredulity.

"Yes," he continued, "it is true. In the fascination of your exquisite beauty, of your innocent gaiety and sweetness, I forgot that I was not free to yield to the spell. I lingered, I hovered near you, and only that night when your eyes confessed that you loved me, I knew that there was no other light in life for me. And then came your sister, cold, stern, pitiless. I saw that she would snatch you from me, and I forgot Mary, I forgot duty, honour, everything! I was yours—only yours—as you were, and are, only mine! Oh Sybil,

pity me ! I have been—I *am*—true to you."

A low sob was her only answer, but it gave him courage to press his suit.

"See, darling, it will cost but one effort, and all will be well. I can arrange everything to-morrow. I have a friend near Gloucester, whose wife will take charge of you—we will be married at once from her house. Your sister will be glad that she has not been forced to consent, and my cousins will be resigned, when there is no further use in remonstrating. I will take you abroad, until all has blown over. Say yes, Sybil, my sweet; will you ruin both our lives for the sake of a sick girl's passing fancy, instilled into her, too, by her parents' greed of wealth ? Say yes, my love—no, do not struggle, you are my captive now,

and I will not let you go, till that one little word pledges you to me once more, to be happy for ever."

"No," she said, "no, no! it would be no happiness for either of us, of which we had robbed poor Mary. Let me go, Darrell, you have no right to detain me. Let me go!"

"And I swear, Sybil, that if you sacrifice yourself and me in your fantastic generosity, the sacrifice shall be in vain. I will not return to Mary—I hate her!—I loathe her! and I will never see her more!"

Oh, blindness of womanhood! I said to myself, in disgust; this selfish brute (I am afraid I actually applied that unladylike term to him in my thought) this selfish brute is the hero of my sweet sister's innocent, maiden imagination.

“ Well, then,” he resumed, as she still seemed to struggle silently to escape, “ if I do as you wish, will you wait for me ? Mary is in a decline, she cannot live long ; will you promise to wait till I am again free, Sybil ?”

“ *No !* ” she cried, vehemently ; “ no, no ! such a promise, even in thought, would not be right—would not be holy.”

“ D—d cant !” he muttered between his teeth ; then in a tone of pleading softness,—

“ You are stronger than I am, dearest, or your affection is far less than mine, if you can resolve on parting for ever thus calmly. Think, darling, we are both so young !—think of the long, desolate years that lie before us, for we shall neither of us forget—we have been too happy for

that—how shall we bear that great loneliness?"

Her voice came choked with tears. "Others have borne it, Darrell, and *she* must bear it if we do not—she, weak and ill, and loving you all her life as she has done. It will be hard, but perhaps God will strengthen us. I think He will, if we do not sin against Him. Oh, God help us! Darrell! God comfort *you*!"

And breaking suddenly from him, she fled swiftly to the house. I heard her low sobs, as she flew along the laurel walk—as the flight of the wounded curlew may be tracked by its wail.

I cared little now whether Mr. Darrell saw me or not, as I shook the gate impatiently in my effort to follow and soothe her; and I do not know whether or not he

recognised me in the dusk, as he darted out of his retreat, bounded over the low railing on to the bridge (very nearly upsetting me into the brook), and rushed away into the wood.

When I reached the cottage Sybil had shut herself into her own room, the maid was lighting the lamp and laying the cloth for supper, and I went upstairs to take off my mantle and hat, glancing at my sister's door as I passed it, from which gleamed no light. As I went down again the door opened softly, and a stealthy footfall overtook me on the landing.

"Sister," she whispered, "I have been in the summer-house—Darrell came to me there, and—"

"I know all, darling—I was on the bridge, and overheard it all. You have done right, Sybil, you could not have acted

otherwise ; and now, my love, remember
that the God of all strength is the God of
all consolation too."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THORNY WREATHS.

"She will pray her woman's prayers, she will weep her
woman's tears,—

(—Toll slowly!)

But her heart is young in pain, and her hopes will spring
again,

By the suntime of her years."

RHYME OF THE DUCHESS MAY.

A UTUMN'S gold had given place to
winter's crystals, and these were fast
dissolving beneath "the windy gleams" of
March. Only two more months, and the
swallows will be here—will have brought
the summer on their wings from over the

far waters, and the summer of my life will have come with them ! My winter has been a long one, but already I feel that it will soon be forgotten. When the day dawns, how quickly we forget the long night, with its sleepless terrors or its mournful dreams !

The winter at Kelvydon had been very dreary. I had been so long unused to life in the country, had so long, in my tender memories of it, associated it only with birds, sunlight, and flowers, and all summer enjoyments, that I had left out of my reckoning the reverse of the medal, the comparative isolation and monotony, the draughty house, the swampy meadows, the frozen garden-plots, or muddy roads, and worse than all, the horrible guns of the Kelvydon idlers—killing the thrushes and blackbirds—even the larks ! rewarding them with death and

mutilation for the sweet songs which had gladdened our summer eves.

But none of these evils would have moved me much, if my fireside had not been darkened by the shadow of my little sister's grief—that it was that made my Kelvycdon winter dreary ! And yet the shadow was by no means an obtrusive one. There are some to whom duty is an iron yoke, under whose pressure they writhe and rebel, until they shake themselves free from it. There are others who feel it as a goad, and while they chafe against the impulse they yet obey it.

And there are some—Sybil was of these—gentle, submissive natures, with little self-consciousness, and no self-analysis, child-like in their reverential, unquestioning acceptance of authority, to whom the recognition of a law of right and order, a

recognition less of the intellect than of the heart,—is as a staff to lean upon, a support in all difficult and thorny paths. To such as these, disappointment has no rankling bitterness, they know not the agony of protracted struggle, of uncertain effort, and wavering resolve. Their wounds, however deep, heal kindly. I did not think that Sybil's sorrow would leave any ineffaceable trace on her sweet healthful nature. I doubted not that “her hopes would spring again, by the sun-time of her years,” yet, to know that she suffered, was such a keen anguish to me! I almost felt ashamed of my own hope and joy, which contrasted so sadly with the blight of hers. But she knew nothing of it yet. How could I call her to rejoice with me, with such a mist of unshed tears still in her pretty eyes? How could I flaunt before her, my triumph in *my* lover's manly fide-

lity, which would seem like a reproach or the treachery and duplicity of itself?

That this duplicity of Wilfred Darrell's had somehow transpired, and that the Kelvydon gossips were perfectly well aware of the cause of his abrupt disappearance, would have been to many a girl the severest part of her trial; but Sybil had too little vanity or selfishness to feel it so, and the dignified simplicity with which she put aside all attempts at sympathy or condolence, did more to silence the would-be consolers than my indignant remonstance and depreciation.

Mr. Darrell had vanished utterly. We had received not a line from Laura Tresham. What, indeed, could she say? To pity her friend would have been to insult her, and she could hardly invite her to rejoice with Mary on the return of the truant—if

he had returned. Still, I thought she might have written me a line, if only to retract her accusation against Sybil, of having intentionally wronged her sister. However, she remained mute, and I concluded that Miss Henny was right when she thus committed on her silence.

“ You were a goose to expect to hear from her, May ! As if she would ever forgive you your knowledge of her charming cousin’s fickleness ! Sybil gave him up, you say ? Well, is a duellist grateful to the adversary who disarms him, and gives him back his sword ? I don’t see why, if Sybil cared for the lad, she should not have kept him when she had got him ! You have all made fools of yourselves together ! But you will hear no more from the Treshams.”
Nor did we.

But Lassie did not languish nor pine.

She had accepted, in all simplicity, the fact that Darrell had never been rightfully hers, and having felt it to be her duty to resign any claim to another woman's affianced husband, she would have considered it a tampering with that duty to cherish any voluntary yearnings or regrets. The poor child even shrank, with an innocent remorse, from the remembrance of having been the cause of wrong, or from the idea of wilfully perpetuating it in thought. In this surrender, there was nothing of the pride of self-sacrifice, it was simply a renunciation of what—in her own words—was “not right, not holy.”

She never named Darrell again. She sent him back his letters and his gifts, and went quietly about her home occupations, as before she knew him, with the one exception of her painting, which she never offered

to resume. She might have grown, perhaps, a trifle thinner, a shade paler, yet no one could say she looked like a love-lorn damsel. Only my watchful eyes could have discerned a change—less buoyancy in her step, less archness in her smile, a seriousness, that was scarcely a shadow, on the fair brow, and the tender eyes. Just such a difference from her former self as there is between a firefly and a glow-worm—between a laugh and a smile—between a skylark's carol and a nightingale's song!

At length, however, came the final pang. It was near Christmas, and Darrell had been gone three months. I was seated alone in my little breakfast parlour, sewing holly-leaves on long strips of calico, for church decoration, when in toddled Henny Hogge. I laid aside my prickly embroidery, and rose to greet her, in some surprise, for it was a

real event to see Henny out of her own house when the snow was falling. Her first inquiry, when she had seated herself, was for Lassie.

“Sybil is gone to the church, with the Barnes and the Bennetts, and that *gang*, to help Mr. Mervyn with the decorations. She is only just gone. I wonder you did not meet her.”

“Ah, then,” said my visitor, “she won’t be back for an hour, and we have plenty of time to talk it all over.”

“To talk what over?”

“The news I have brought you, my dear, here it is.”

And Henny drew forth a “Court Journal” from her ample pocket, and began to smooth it open upon the table, while I watched her with a vague apprehension of what her “news” might be. She did not keep me long

in suspense. Her finger travelled down the page, to the column of marriages, and my eye followed, till it paused at this announcement:—

“On the 5th, at the Embassy, Naples, Wilfred Charles Darrell, Esq., of Dynford Court, Somerset, to Mary Louisa, eldest daughter of Roden Tresham, Esq., Pengwyllock, Cornwall.”

I read it silently. At first I was not sure whether the emotion it caused me was pain or pleasure, but at last I drew a deep breath, and said—

“I am glad, I am very glad! Now all is over, and Sybil will be more at rest when she knows the worst.”

“I think so too,” assented Henny. “I got the paper this morning. I knew whenever the marriage took place it would be advertised in the ‘Court Journal,’ because

he would know it was not a likely paper to be taken in at Kelvydon, so I have taken it regularly for the last two months, that you might be able to break the news to Sybil before it could reach her from other quarters."

"It was very kind of you, Miss Henny ; you call lovers fools, and love-making folly, but you are so thoughtful for them in their troubles, that I suspect you have more sympathy with them than you choose to own."

"The range of human sympathy would be narrowed indeed, May," returned my companion, "if fools were to be excluded from it,—and Sybil is at church, you say, 'helping' Mr. Mervyn ? Perhaps Mr. Mervyn is 'helping' *her*—to forget young Darrell ?"

"Ridiculous ! Miss Henny ! My Lassie

is not the girl to transfer her affections so quickly."

"Why not? Her *ci-devant* suitor has set her the example—at least, she does not laugh at the curate as she used to do."

"Poor darling! her merry moods are less frequent than they used to be; besides, she can feel for disappointed affection now, as she could not when she was happier; and, I must say, Mr. Mervyn is very nice, his sympathy is so tender, so delicate, never obtrusive, yet ever watchful to guard her from any allusion that might pain her, from some of our coarser Kelvydon chatterers. I do not wonder that Sybil is grateful to him."

"Nor do I," observed Henny, dryly; "I don't wonder, nor sha'n't wonder, at anything."

"But," I continued, loftily ignoring Miss Hogge's significant emphasis, "if Mr. Mervyn cherishes any foolish hopes from Sybil's gentleness to him, it is quite too absurd! He is the last sort of person such a girl would think of loving."

"I should just like to know," remarked Henny, staring dreamily into vacancy with her great black eyes, from the corners of which shot forth a sly twinkle in my direction—"I should just like to know who and where, is that curious individual so often spoken of, 'the last sort of person' that any girl thinks of loving. I have an idea that he is at least as scarce as a Mastodon or an Ichthyosaurus, and belongs, probably, to the same geological era. I am almost sure he is extinct *now*. There! there! when I see you tapping with your tiny foot like that, I know you are going

to fizz, so let us talk of something else.
When do you expect your shepherd home?"

"I don't like nicknames."

"Well, but he *is* a shepherd, isn't he?
Literally, too, whereas Julius Mervyn is
only one metaphorically. When do you
expect Mr. Challoner home? The mail
was in on Tuesday—you had a letter, of
course?"

"Of course I had. He hopes to be here
—here in Kelvydon—early in June."

"And at the very thought your blue
eyes sparkle, your cheek flushes like the
lip of a pink sea-shell. Don't be too eager
for the realisation of your hope, little
woman: every earthly joy is fairer in the
bud than in the blossom."

"Nay, Miss Henny, I have been patient
long enough, surely: a blossom cannot be
always in the bud."

“ Sometimes it is,” she answered, “ for if too long in the bud, it never blooms well.”

I thought Miss Hogge particularly disagreeable to-day.

“ Is that Lady Emily thing coming home with Thorold ?”

“ So he tells me.”

“ And you are not jealous ?”

“ Not a bit ; why should I be ? She is his brother’s sister-in-law, you know.”

“ It is rather dangerous for a man who has been long unused to female society to be penned up on ship-board for a long voyage with a young and beautiful woman —a sprightly widow, too.”

“ You can’t frighten me, Miss Henny. Lady Emily is not young, she is older than I am, Thor says ; but if she were, my Thorold’s truth has stood too long

and too severe a test for me to doubt it now."

"What does Sybil think of it?"

"Sybil knows nothing of the relation between Thorold and me; she only knows him as her guardian, an old and valued friend of her father's, and mine. Poor child! I could not bear to cause her the pain of contrasting my happiness with her own so recent sorrow."

"You are wrong, May Wharnecliffe, altogether wrong; there is no more certain cure for any sorrow than interest in the joys of others. Sybil knows how you have grieved with her; it is but fair that you should let her rejoice with you."

"So I will, but not yet, not just at first. She shall know and value Thorold as a friend before she is asked to love him as a brother."

“ You are always dreamy and unpractical, May. But here is Sybil — back already—shall I go ?”

Before I could answer, my sister was in the room.

“ Good morning, Miss Hogge,” she said. “ Don’t let me disturb you ; I have only come for May’s holly wreath, they are waiting for it in the church. What, not done yet ? Oh, you lazy Mite ! Here, give me a needle, I’ll go on at the other end.”

So saying, she knelt down before me, and began to sew on the holly leaves, when, on turning to take some from the table, her eye fell on the newspaper.

“ ‘ The Court Journal,’ I declare ! How fashionable we are ! What is in it ?”

“ Never mind, child,” said Henny, quite nervously for her, and motioning to take

the paper from her, “you shall look at it by-and-bye.”

But Sybil’s glance had already wandered to the fatal column, and caught sight of Wilfred Darrell’s name.

Miss Henny and I exchanged an anxious look.

A bright scarlet rushed to the girl’s forehead, and as suddenly faded, leaving her pale to the quivering lips. For a moment she kept her eyes fixed on the paper, then dropped it, and bent over the holly-wreath on her lap, while Miss Henny began to talk with more than her usual volubility, and less than her usual perspicuity, on the uselessness of church decorations in general, and of Kelvydon church decorations in particular. As for me, I could only silently watch the bending figure at my feet.

She sewed on rapidly, hurriedly. Once her needle slipped on the glossy surface of the leaf, and pierced her finger, but she gave no heed to the blood that dropped on the embroidery, and still sewed on. At last she rose, gathered up the long strips of unfinished work, and turned quietly to the door.

“This will do,” she said; “I will carry them to Mr. Mervyn.”

Miss Henny looked after her as she quitted the room.

“You were right, May,” she remarked, “in saying that Sybil was not passionate. Think of the girl getting such news as *that*, and walking coolly back to the church with her decorations.”

But I had been keenly listening to my sister’s retreating footsteps, and knew that she had retired to her own room, trailing

her thorny garland as she went, and thither I followed her when Miss Henny had left me.

She was kneeling by the side of her bed, her face buried in her hands ; the holly-wreath lay near her, all glistening with the tears that had been fast dropping on it as she let it fall. I stood by for a moment in silence, but she did not speak nor look up. So I left a kiss on her soft hair, and taking up the holly-braiding, went down, and told the parlour-maid to carry it to the church, with her young mistress's excuses—doubtless considerably to Mr. Mervyn's disappointment and disgust.—Mr. Mervyn, indeed !

II.—MAY'S PORTION.

CHAPTER I.

MORNING !

AT last ! Morning at last ! What sort of morning should that be, which has been looked forward to, and longed for, through twelve slow summers and winters ? on which the soul's eyes have been yearningly fixed, through the ever lessening distance, unheeding all, or almost all, of the joys of life's fleeting spring-time ?

I had lain tossing for hours, excited and

restless, till the sudden thought struck me, how worn and haggard one looks after a sleepless night, and then I quieted myself by a resolute effort, fastened down my wandering thoughts to some dull domestic calculation of a grocer's bill, and fell asleep in the mental endeavour to cut a bar of yellow soap into six equal squares (an exercise which I can recommend to the wakeful as a real soporific). I had left my window-blind undrawn, that I might lose no hour, no moment, of the long wished-for day, and before my eyes were well open, I had sprung from my bed, and ran to see what sort of morning it was.

But the sun had not risen yet, there was a thin moon low in the sky. In her light the garden looked gray and wan; a pale mist lay like a gauze veil upon the

flower-beds. The birds were not stirring in the ivy yet ; no sound but the rustling of foliage, as though the trees “ sighed in their sleep,” and the ripple of the brook over its gravel bed, so low, it was only heard through the great stillness.

I leaned forth from the lattice, gazed, listened, and shivered. There was a solemnity deeper than night’s in such a dawn. Lifting my eyes to heaven I saw a star shining down upon me, pure and calm, and I felt rebuked, like a child that rushes in boisterous glee into its mother’s presence, and finds her praying.

Well, could not I, too, pray ? or is love, faithful, happy love, less sacred than sorrow ? Is it only in heaven, that praise is worthier than prayer ?

I went back to bed, and fell asleep again, and this time, my slumber was

profound. I was awoke by the flutter of wings near my pillow. A little bird had strayed in through the open casement, and was bidding me rise, and put him out. Up I sprang, once more. Oh, the glory of the sunlight! Oh, the blue rapture of the cloudless sky! How the flowers glittered beneath their jewellery of dewdrops! How the river twinkled and laughed, as the alders shook and whispered over it.

The dewdrops flashed for me ; the rivulet leaped for me ; the flowers looked up, and smiled at me ; even as I looked on, a wandering breeze brushed merrily by, and flung the gathered fragrance of a world of roses in my face.

However, I could not stand whole hours at the window, so I turned away a little reluctantly, from all this

wealth of beauty and gladness, and proceeded to make my morning toilette. Only my morning toilette, be it said. There was to be another and a more elaborate one, later in the day, for Thorold could not, by the law of railway travelling, be with me until the evening.

I went down to a lonely breakfast, for I had all the house to myself and the maids. Sybil was gone for a few days' visit to Plaistow. Truth to tell, I had begged the invitation for her, that my first meeting with my beloved might be unwitnessed. How else could I hope that my long cherished secret would remain one for her?

She went away smiling, but quite unsuspicous.

"I suppose, Mite," she said, "that you consider me too much of a baby to be

present at your grave councils ? But remember, that whatever you settle with my guardian about our affairs, I claim to have a voice in them later. Mind, I shall not let him advise you to go away from Kelvydon. I like Woodglen, and I mean to live and die here."

"Why should you fancy that Mr. Challoner will wish us to leave Woodglen?" I asked, a little consciously.

"Well, I don't know, unless that he may think it dull himself, and so fancy it is dull for you. Old creatures like Mr. Challoner always choose lively places to live in."

"Old creatures, indeed !" I laughed to myself this morning, as I thought of my Lassie's ineradicable notion that her guardian must be an old man. Then I stopped suddenly, to reflect. "*Is he old ?*"

He is thirty-seven. Some few years younger than Colonel Brereton, for whom Constance Stacy, a girl of twenty, is “dying in love.” But of course, Colonel Brereton, and Thorold too, are quite “old creatures,” compared to Wilfred Darrell or Julius Mervyn.

After breakfast, I went into the garden to gather fresh flowers for my vases, and while I was arranging them on the drawing-room tables, Miss Henny opened the street door without knocking, and marched quietly in, carrying something mysteriously concealed beneath her shawl.

“Go on, my dear,” she said, nodding at me, and seating herself on the sofa, still clasping her secret treasure in her arms, “don’t mind me, I just looked in to see how you were getting on. Decorating your rooms, eh? New lace cur-

tains, fresh flowers. How like a woman ! As if Mr. Challoner would care one bit how your drawing-room looked, or even notice it."

"He may not notice it, but he will *feel* that it is pretty, unless he is greatly changed. Thorold was always so keenly alive to the sense—to *all* sense—of beauty."

"Arriving so late, there is one thing to which he is sure to be keenly alive, and that is the sense of hunger, and I have brought something, the beauty of which he will fully appreciate, that is, a beef-steak pie."

And Miss Henny triumphantly produced, from beneath her shawl, a large blue dish, and placed it on the table. I stared at her aghast.

"Yes," she continued, "I felt certain that you, with your romantic love-dreams,

would never think that your lover would need more solid refreshment than kisses, and flowers which he can't eat. But I know men better than you do, and that in a masculine organisation the heart is placed considerably *behind* the stomach." (An anatomical statement which I doubted, but did not venture to dispute.) "So I ordered that pie at Mrs. Grave's yesterday evening. No woman in England makes them better than she does, and I never yet saw a man who did not enjoy beefsteak pie with forcemeat in it."

I had now recovered from my astonishment.

"It is very kind of you, Miss Henny, to take so much trouble, but I wish you had not done so. Thorold will dine at Trentham; the train changes there, and he will have two hours to wait."

Poor Henny looked so disappointed at this information that I felt it would have been more gracious in me to have accepted her offering, even though I had eaten it all up myself! However she quickly rallied.

“Never mind, the train stops at Trentham at five, and leaves for Kelvydon at seven. He’ll stop with you some hours, but he will want his supper when he goes to his lodgings, and you can give him this to take home with him.”

I confess I was ungrateful enough to feel quite cross at this suggestion of Miss Hogge’s. In my present high-pitched key of sentiment, there was something jarring in the idea of a love-meeting—and such a love-meeting!—winding up with the gift of a meat-pie! I almost suspected that she was laughing at me, so I made no answer, and taking my silence for acquiescence, she

was satisfied, and vouchsafed to praise the bright room and the gay garden.

“But he will see little of either to-night, May, for it will be dusk when the train arrives; you will have to light the lamp to see one another by.”

“I shall certainly not light the lamp, there will be daylight enough to see a little of him, and—and—” Here I faltered, and stopped. I did not like to confess my weakness, but in truth I was anxious that Thorold should not see at once, or too clearly, the change that years had made in the woman he had left a girl. Henny took a long pinch of snuff, and then turned and looked me all over.

“You need not be afraid, May, there is no alteration in you that can shock any lover.”

“I am not afraid,—not in the least,—but of course there must be a change in us both. I almost feel that I shall be timid with Thorold as with a stranger, at first. But his voice will be the same, and men alter less than women.”

“Quite a mistake, that.”

“Oh, Miss Henny, do I look very antique? I saw some *pattes d'oie* round my eyes this morning, and some faint lines round my mouth; I am such a mite, as Sybil calls me, and little women wither and shrivel so.”

“Stuff!” said my friend, “you are well enough,—what there is of you,—you don’t seem to think how Thorold may have altered; I daresay he is as thin as a lath, and as yellow as a lemon; or else as fat and bloated as a tipsy drover, with a red

nose, from all the brandy he has imbibed in the bush."

"He cannot but be a fine-looking man, be his nose red or blue!"

"That, of course,—by the way, what has he done with Lady Emily Knyvett?"

"He has left her in London to be sure; she was to go to some friends in the North until her sister and Sir Franklin return to England. They are in Germany now; Sir Franklin is in delicate health."

"And if he dies, you will one day be Lady Challoner."

"He is in no danger of dying; besides, after some years of marriage, they have got a little daughter, they may have a son and heir one day."

"It is well that such contingencies need not affect you, now that Mr. Challoner is rich. Well, good-bye. Bring Thorold to see

me soon—or rather for me to see him—for if he is so alive to beauty, my charms may not be quite up to his mark; and mind you don't forget to give him my pie."

CHAPTER II.

“WHEN THE PIE WAS OPENED.”

“THIS is truth the poet sings, that a sorrow’s crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.” Is it truth, indeed? No! say I, and a thousand times no! There are moments of such joy, that even its after-glow can light up years of hopeless gloom; when the cup of existence, foaming to the brim with sweetness and rapture, is drained in one deep draught; but the sigh that must follow is not a sigh of pain! “I have lived and loved,” sings Thekla, and high above the sadness rings the

triumph in her song ! Years have passed away since that evening when hope and longing were crowned with fruition, and I was once more folded to my lover's heart ; but though that heart has long been stilled in death, and the coldness worse than death has fallen upon mine, never, no never have I been so false to nature and to truth, as to deny that the joy of that moment has been a joy to me for ever ! Night has fallen, but not therefore will I blaspheme the gladness and the glory of the vanished day.

It was growing dark when Thorold arrived,—it had grown nearly pitch dark while I still sat beside him, careless, forgetful, unconscious of everything but that my head lay on his shoulder, that his arm was round me, and my hand clasped in his, as on the night we parted,—twelve

years ago,—and all the fears, the regrets, the loneliness, had passed away like an evil dream. The same voice murmured in my ear, the same caressing words of endearment, with the far sweeter significance it had gained by a proved and unswerving fidelity.

I scarcely know how long I had rested in this state of dreamy contentment, when Thorold waxed impatient.

“ My little May,” he said, “ here have I been beside you this half hour and I have not seen you yet! is there a law in your cottage against candles? Does the curfew-bell sound in Kelvydon? Rise up, sweet, and call your handmaid to bring lights. ‘Meet me by moonlight alone,’ I have no objection to that, but meet me by no light is a different thing.”

And then he laughed, — the frank,

boyish laugh of old,—but still I clung to him.

“Oh, Thorold, a few minutes longer, *one* illusion the light must dispel! Let me a little longer forget the lapse of time, and think we are boy and girl again, as when we were together in the shrubberies of Hawkeshurst.”

He laughed again. “Will you wait till we are seventy, dreaming that we are seventeen? You were always a dreamer, my May flower! Since those days I have been tumbled about the world until all the romance has been knocked out of me. If you choose to reverse the story of Cupid and Psyche, I will act in character, at least, and take a good look at my Psyche, if only I can find the confounded bell.” And so saying, Thorold withdrew his arm from me, and was moving to the chimney-piece, when I sprang up and stopped him.

“Don’t ring, Thor, I will light the lamp for you, if—if—oh, Thor! you won’t mind it much, will you, if you find me greatly changed?”

“I will summon up fortitude to bear it, my dear, only don’t keep me too long in suspense,—why May, darling, have you lost your dimples?”

No, certainly, I had not lost my dimples, though I had long ceased to be vain of them, since my young sister’s had been so much lovelier than mine; still it was a comfort that Thor seemed to feel so much interest in the one poor little attraction I possessed that was least likely to change. So I took courage, lit the moderator, and turned it up to its fullest light,—and then Thorold and I stood and stared at one another.

At the first glance I thought him greatly

altered, but no, it was only in figure, after all. The tall slight youth had become a robust, wide-shouldered, broad-breasted man, but his face was little changed.

I wonder if I can describe him.—He was neither very fair nor very dark, although a life passed in the open air had embrowned his complexion to a deeper tint than was natural to it. His nose,—I must leave out his nose,—it was not remarkable, it was neither very short nor very long, it didn't turn up and it didn't hook down. But his mouth and chin were remarkable, clearly cut, finely curved, with an expression of mingled resolution and sweetness, such as I have never seen in any other mouth in the same degree. He had large bright brown eyes, which looked frankly and merrily into yours, as if they could never droop or wander from any question-

ing glance,—so bold and true they were ! His eyebrows were black, mobile, and finely arched ; and his hair a chestnut brown, mixed with some threads of grey, curled closely round a well-shaped head and intelligent brow.

Meantime he was gazing fixedly at me, and I was instinctively aware of something enquiring and critical in his look, from which I recoiled with a pang. Then he smiled, and held out his arms to me, and I nestled to his side, as if taking refuge from some secret danger, and whispered softly—

“ Does the change grieve you, Thorold, my dearest ? for your sake only I could wish myself for ever young and fair.”

“ Nay, little woman,” he answered gaily, “ since we are to go through life together, it is as well that time’s touch should be

impartial. The dimples are still there, and the slight form, and the little foot—put it forth this minute—yes, with its dainty *chaussure*. I am not afraid of hostile criticism for my bride,—I would not exchange her ladylike and feminine charm for any newer brilliancy of bloom.”

“Not even for Lady Emily Knyvett’s?”
I asked, laughing.

“Lady Emily?—why, she must have lost her bloom before yours was in its perfection. Are you jealous of her, Mayette?”

“Jealous?—not a bit. Why should there be any more danger from Lady Emily than from all the other women you must have passed by, for poor little fading me?”

“To tell truth,” he replied, laughing,
“I have not been so sorely tempted as you

seem to suppose. There are very few educated women to be met with in the Bush, and nearly as few attractive ones. Still, Lady Emily is in some sort your rival, Mayette, for a marriage between her and me is the dearest wish of my brother and his wife."

"Then they do not know of my prior claim?"

"Of course not. I am bound by my uncle's wish to three months' secrecy yet. Do you think that it is as difficult for a man to keep a secret as it is to you women?"

"Ah, there spoke the old Thorold of Hawkeshurst! Have you not yet overcome that masculine arrogance of yours, sir?—But you have just confessed that you have mixed little in female society; so your ignorance shall excuse your insolence. Tell

me, Thor, will your relatives be very hostile to your choice of me ? ”

“ Don’t trouble yourself about that, little May ; when you are my wife, I will see that neither my brother nor Lady Harriet forgets your claim to their respect ; but you must not feel hurt if they are tardy in acknowledging it. Lady Harriet, I am told, is as haughty as the devil, and Sir Franklin is too apathetic, from indolence and ill-health, to run counter to her in anything. And then, they have both set their hearts on my marrying their sister. It will be a disappointment to them, of course, to learn that *that* plan is hopeless.”

“ Well, they must get over their disappointment, as other people do. By the way, Thor, you have never once enquired for Sybil ? ”

“I beg ten thousand pardons. How is Sybil,—and where is she ?”

“She is from home ; but she will come back to-morrow. She is very well, and lovelier than ever !”

“Lovely, is she ?—of course, ‘every crow thinks her young the whitest.’ You know, May, I have never forgotten my old grudge against Sybil ; but for your weakness for that brat, we should have been an old married pair now, with daughters nearly as old, and a great deal handsomer.”

“You had better overcome your grudge, sir, for your own comfort’s sake,—for I will never part from Sybil, and you will have her to live with you all your days.”

“All right ! But if she is such a paragon as you say, she will not be long on your hands. Another Mr. Darrell will be forthcoming, and—oh, May !—what a goose you

were to let that scamp visit at your house, when you knew so little about him ! You certainly need a husband's authority, to govern both your sister and you. For both your sakes, I shall insist that [no time be lost in investing me with that authority ; or, perhaps, your consideration for Sybil's sorrows will lead you to postpone it indefinitely.”

“ Not exactly so,” I laughed ; “ but there is a great deal to settle first. Why, Thordold, have you decided yet where we are to live ?”

“ That is a very secondary question, little woman, since there is—praise be to Providence—no need for anxiety as to *how* we are to live ! We are nearly in June. The six months my uncle stipulated for will have expired in November,—Franklin and his wife will be home in September. I

shall go to Hawkeshurst then, and come back for you. We will be married at Christmas."

"Dictatorial as ever! But shall I be able to keep you at my side, in this quiet little nook, until September?"

"So long as you give me a moderate length of chain, I may as well be here as anywhere else,—while my people are away."

"That is not a very lover-like speech."

"My dear, I am out of practice in making lover-like speeches. I think we have played the rôle of lovers long enough. I am anxious to change it for one more suited to our ripe years. We'll leave love-making to Sybil,—wishing her better luck in her next venture. What sort of lodgings have you taken for me,—are they far from here?"

“ Only in the next street. I hope you will find them comfortable ; our inn is so very bad. I wish you could have stayed here with us.”

“ So do I, Mayette ; but, of course, Mrs. Grundy must be respected. I beg your pardon,—I really forgot that I have returned to polished society.”

This was in reference to a tremendous yawn.

“ You are tired, Thorold ?”

“ No, sweet, not tired,—only hungry. I have been wondering for the last half-hour whether you would give me anything to eat !”

And so Henny was right after all. I felt rebuked and abashed, as I left the room to give the necessary directions to the servant, and found that there would

have been no supper but for the despised pie.

As I sat watching my companion's evident appreciation thereof, with a kind of humorous anger, I felt impelled to inform him to whom he owed the timely refreshment.

"Miss Henny Hogge?" he repeated.—"Oh, ah, yes!—the old maiden lady you wrote about. Judging of her by this production of her genius, I should say she must be an accomplished woman."

"But, Thor, she did not *make* the pie,—she only bought it. The idea of Miss Henny making a pie—making anything!"

"She did not make it? I admire her all the more then, since her choice of a gift was not dictated by pride in her own

performances. Miss Henny possesses a very keen and very delicate sympathy. I will go to-morrow, and offer her my homage. Dear Miss Hogge ! In ‘the eternal fitness of things,’ she should have given me a pork-pie ! Oh, how I love her !”

CHAPTER III.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

THOROLD'S gratitude to Miss Henny outlived the enjoyment of her benefits, and he held firm to his resolution to call on her the next morning. Knowing, however, what Henny's morning toilette was like, I thought it better to avoid the danger of surprising her in it, and therefore contrived to send my maid across to her with a note, to prepare her for our visit. Very proud and happy was I as I walked into the town, leaning on the arm of my handsome,

stately lover. Hanging to his arm, I might almost say, for I had nearly to stand on tip-toe to reach it. He too, seemed happy, or at least, contented. If in his manner there was not the romantic ardour of his boyish passion, it would have been a weakness in me to regret that. He was very kind, very tender even, and he was all and only mine.

Miss Henny received us very graciously in a quite unobjectionable costume (for her) and in her uncoffined room of state. She was evidently flattered and gratified by the attention.

“It was so good of you to come, Mr. Challoner, and so good of you, May, to bring him. I thought you would have gone off perhaps, to fetch Sybil home to welcome her brother.”

“You are in May’s confidence, I see,”

said Thorold, “a confidence from which Sybil is to be excluded for the present.”

“And do you sanction that whim of hers ?” asked Henny.

“It would not do for me to oppose any whim of May’s, at our first meeting,” he answered, smiling ; “it is her day of power now, and as I mean it to be brief, I allow it to be absolute.”

“I suppose you mean yours to be absolute by-and-bye, it is easy to read that in your eyes and mouth ; but I give you warning, that if you attempt to play the tyrant, Miss Wharnecliffe, gentle as she looks, will not be a submissive slave. There is a world of hidden fire deep down in those soft blue eyes of hers.”

Thorold laughed and patted my hand, “It is the fire of the hearth, Miss Hogge, and not of the volcano. May has been my

willing subject ever since she was a little maid of seven years old, it is too late for you to preach rebellion now."

Henny turned to me. "You are as fresh as a rose this morning, May Wharnecliffe, you are still rapt in your dream, I see, but Mr. Challoner looks little like a dreamer, *he* has awoke up, hasn't he?"

I shook my head and smiled.

"A dreamer, I ?" said Thorold, "no, you are right there. If I nod sometimes, I can start up and shake off my dreams, as most men can, who have led an active life like mine. But this Kelvydon air is somnolent, I think, or we find dreams so pleasant that we court them. Wake up, May, and come and show me your town lions."

"She would rather show you the woods and the hills," said Henny.

"I have had enough and to spare of

woods and hills, and all nature's solitudes ; I shall find a much greater charm in streets and houses."

" Away with you then, and feast your eyes on the advanced civilization of Kelvydon as expressed in the draper's shop round the corner, and the chemist's in the next street. Be sure and admire our gas-lamps, they are only ten years old ; and, oh, yes, there's the railway station, the fashionable promenade of the Kelvydonians, every afternoon, to see the down-train come in, which is supposed to bring us our newest London fashions, and to see the up-train go off, carrying with it some townsman or townswoman of ours, who is 'seen off' by half Kelvydon, and dismissed with general embraces from everybody. It always reminds me of the multitude of kisses St. Paul sends to his

acquaintance, and takes nearly as long to get through. By-the-bye, there's an arrival expected, May. Johnnie Brereton is coming down to-morrow. A rival of yours, Mr. Challoner, so don't expect to have it all your own way."

"Ah, well," he said carelessly, "we'll go and meet him, won't we, May? A train coming in seems an exciting event here; how much more when it brings a lover for her, and a rival for me."

Henny's eyes twinkled as we quitted her presence with a meaning I could not decipher, and when we got into the street, I was childish enough to leave Thorold on the door-step, while I ran back to her, to ask eagerly—"What do you think of him?"

"Is he like what you expected to see? tell me that first."

"Yes,—no—he is more manly-looking. He is very handsome, is he not?"

“He is well enough. Take care of him, May, the young girls may dispute your treasure with you.”

“Let them try, if they like. Oh, Miss Henny, I have not vaunted him too much, have I?”

Her eyes dwelt silently, almost wistfully, on me, then she sighed and said—“Go back to him, child, in heaven’s name, waste no more time, be happy while you can.”

Happy! the world seemed overflowing with happiness, and all mine, all for me! I had wasted no time, I had lost no treasure, the joy of my youth had only not been spent, it had been hoarded all these years to be given back to me now with accumulated interest.

“Why, little woman,” cried Thorold, when I rejoined him, “you are as merry as a grig, as the blithe May Queen you were

when we were spooning ; is it because you have me with you again that you are so full of glee ?”

“ I shall not flatter you with an answer, sir, especially when you use such a vile word as spooning. Not that way, Thorold, the railway station is out yonder.”

“ I don’t want to go to the station ; let us go back to your cottage, May, and sit in the garden under the trees, it is hot and dusty.”

Nothing loth, I went back with him to Woodglen, and after wandering about the lawn for a little, I graciously permitted him to light a cigar, and sit down to smoke it in the root-house, which had witnessed my poor Lassie’s parting with Wilfred Darrell. Heedless of the certainty that my fresh muslin dress would be perfumed with tobacco smoke, I sat by his

side, his arm round me, his eyes fixed, not on my face, but on the sunny garden beyond, over which passed flickering shadows of leaf or bird, as it lay hushed and palpitating in the summer noon. After a long silence, he took his cigar from his lips to say—

“Isn’t this jolly? you and I, little May, side-by-side again, as we used to be ‘when life and hope were young!’ One can almost forget——” He paused, and added, “No, that cannot be—one cannot turn back the current of one’s life, nor pen its ever widening flood in the narrow channel in which it once flowed. Something, doubtless, is lost, but much too is gained.”

“What worth regretting can be lost, Thorold, dearest, since love and faith remain?” My lover laughed lightly.

“We won’t speak of losses, little woman,

but only count our gains. Perhaps nothing is lost but what time inevitably sweeps away. Yes, we have our faith and love—no more transports and tumults, but also no more fears, nor partings. A quiet home in my native country, with a kind little wife to preside over it, a competence—in past years I should have called it wealth—means to purchase all reasonable pleasures, and leisure to enjoy them. Fortune has been very favourable to me."

Presently he flung away his cigar, and turned suddenly to me.

"My child, why did you not warn me, that your friend Henny is such an awful fright? It is a shock to my nervous system to see such a hideous woman, only one can scarcely call a thing with such a beard, a woman."

“There are several gentlemen who are fond of Miss Henny’s society ; so I suppose they forgive her want of beauty, as you will do by and by, Thorold.”

“She is as ugly as a nightmare, and she’ll give me one, unless I can remove the impression by looking at you.”

“I can suggest a better remedy than that,” I said, laughing. “Sybil will be here directly, and such a face as hers will—”

“Efface Miss Hogge’s ? I wish she would come, then, before the last image becomes permanently fixed on my tortured brain.”

“You are not so chivalrous as Colonel Brereton. He says that no woman, who is not wicked, can be ugly. I am not sure that he does not say, no human being can be so ; and he is as kind

and attentive to the elder women as to the younger."

"*De gustibus*, &c., — he had better appropriate all the old women for the benefit of those who do not sympathise with his taste! No one would dispute his claim to your friend,—such a fright as that could never have belonged to anybody!"

"How you talk, Thorold! A woman 'belongs' only to herself, and to God!"

"You belong to me, don't you?"

"In a sense—"

"Only in a sense,—or in all senses? Body, soul, and spirit,—are you not — have you not always been—mine?"

"Yes!"

"Then shut up, and don't talk about things beyond your limited capacity. Hark! What's that?"

'That' was my young sister's laugh,—the

sweet laugh, like a silver chime, that had gladdened me but rarely of late, and which seemed to break on me now like joy-bells, ringing in my life's new gladness.

The next moment she appeared at the end of the laurel-fringed walk that stretched straight before us. She came swiftly on, holding her hat and feather high in the air, out of the reach of her water-s spaniel (the sole gift of Darrell's which she had retained), and as the dog leaped and bounded in gamesome effort to snatch it from her, and she still raised it higher, her girlish symmetry displayed itself in every movement of unconscious grace. On she came, between the glittering laurels, all the glow and fragrance of summer on her blooming cheeks and rosy lips,—all the light of summer in her laughing eyes, and the gleam of her burnished hair.

I made a step forward to meet her ; but Thorold caught me back, and stood silently watching her, as she came near, then, drawing a deep breath, he murmured, scarcely above a whisper—

“ My God !—how exquisite ! ”

It was not spoken in irreverence, and my heart bounded exultingly. My Sybil had won a brother !

Meanwhile, she had advanced to within a few paces of our retreat, and stood peering into the inner darkness, while with one arm she attempted to repress the rough gambols of her dog.

“ Mite ! Mite ! ”—she cried—“ What are you hiding in there for ? Come out, you little white owl ; I see the skirt of your dress. Come out, — I have news for you ! ”

Thorold stepped forward into the doorway.

“ Will a brown owl do as well as a white one, Sybil ? ”

She drew back, slightly startled, then laughed merrily, and held out both her hands to him.

“ Welcome to Woodglen, Mr. Challoner ! My guardian,—what a guardian, to neglect your ward for all these years ! Have I not a good memory to remember you for so long ? ”

“ It is only a borrowed memory, I fear,” he answered ; “ but *I* remember the little damsel of six years old, whose parting kiss I have kept to give back to her.”

And still holding her hands, he bent down and kissed her forehead. She took refuge at my side, still smiling, but blushing slightly too.

“And what is your news, Sybil? I have only been here a few hours; but already I feel the pervading spirit of the place, and am all athirst for its gossip?”

She glanced up in his face from beneath her long curled eyelashes, half shily, half saucily.

“You are very contemptuous of the spirit of the place, Mr. Challoner; such a poor little nook of earth as it must seem to a traveller like you! You will be as much out of place here as Maria Gibson’s gold pheasant in the aviary, among her finches and linnets; but you can get away when you are tired of it, and *that* can’t—”

“But your news, Lassie?” I asked. “For, whatever Thorold may be, I am one of the finches, and have the same small local interests, you know.”

“No such great news, Mite. First of

all, Colonel Brereton is coming to Plaistow to-morrow.”

“ We know that. Miss Henny told us ! ”

“ It seems,” remarked Thorold, “ that it is Colonel Brereton, and not I, who is the gold pheasant in your aviary, Sybil, since his arrival seems to flutter the finches so.”

The girl nodded at him, and went on—

“ And the Stacys are losing their nearest neighbours. The Stanley Clarkes are going to her mother’s, at Jersey, and Ferndell is to be let furnished for six months.”

“ Will it do for me ? ” said Thorold. “ I think I should like to settle down for a few months in this lotus-eating land of yours.”

“ Oh, that would be charming ! ” cried

Lassie, clapping her hands. “Would not Ferndell Cottage be just the place for him, May?”

“Are you in earnest, Thor?” I enquired doubtfully.

“Quite so. I should like a *pied-à-terre* for a few months, until—until affairs are settled, and my brother returns to England. Kelvydon lodgings are all very well for a few days; but I am rather cramped in them. Is there stabling, and all that, at Ferndell, Sybil?”

“Oh yes,—it is very complete—quite a charming bachelor’s residence, but too small, Mrs. Stanley Clarke says, for a married pair. It has beautiful grounds, and they keep several horses.”

Then suddenly checking herself, with a look of comic bewilderment—

“But you have no horses. You can have none?”

“If the cottage suits me in other respects, I’ll soon have horses. Horses for me, and for you and May to ride with me. Would you like that, my ward?”

And Thorold seemed fully rewarded for his brilliant promises, as he looked admiringly at the childish eagerness in the bright face of his “ward.”

I wondered what Miss Sybil thought of “the old creature” now! But, suddenly, her face clouded.

“Oh, but I forget; Colonel Brereton thinks of taking Ferndell for the shooting season. Of course, he can’t shoot himself, poor dear; but he says he will get a companion more easily at that time.”

“All right,” persisted Thor. “I will be

his companion,—if he's a good fellow, and I suppose he is, as you Kelvydon ladies are so fond of him,—we shall get on very well together. So to-morrow, May, you shall present me to him,—and we'll all go and see Ferndell together."

CHAPTER IV.

SYBIL "EN AMAZONE."

SO prompt and energetic was Mr. Chal-loner in carrying out his projects, that before the week had expired, he had made his arrangements with Colonel Brereton for their joint tenancy of Ferndell Cottage. He had agreed with its occupants—who were as eager to resign it as he was to take it—and within three weeks of his arrival in England, he was established in the Cottage,—he, his servants, his horses, and his dogs.

Sleepy Kelvydon opened its eyes with a

little languid wonder at what could have brought a wealthy stranger to set himself down in the sylvan solitudes of the Brierly woods, when there was no shooting or hunting to amuse him there ; but then, to be sure, there was no shooting or hunting anywhere else, as yet—and the partridges would be forthcoming round Ferndell as soon as in other places,—and the pheasants in greater plenty there than in most places ; and, meantime, Miss Wharnecliffe's guardian had all her affairs to set in order for her,—and, satisfied with this explanation, Kelvydon went to sleep again.

I hardly knew whether I was pleased or not with the arrangement, but that mattered little, as Mr. Challoner did not consult me—he never did. He was the most decided autocrat I ever saw. It never seemed to enter into his head that I could,

or, at least, ought to have any difference of opinion from him on any point whatever, or that if I had, it could be of the slightest consequence. To me, who had been accustomed for so many years to a life of independent action, even in a small way, of absolute rule, it was quite a new sensation to find all my wisdom thus loftily ignored. But I was amused rather than annoyed at it—can any true woman feel a wish to strive for rule with the man whom she loves with her whole heart? or can he raise himself above her higher than she has voluntarily enthroned him? Still, my affection for Thorold did not blind me to his faults, though I preferred to look away from them to his merits. If he was a little harsh in his judgments, a little intolerant of the adverse opinions of others, he was rarely careless of their feelings. If too

proud of his own strength, too ready in self-assertion, he could be generous to admitted weakness. He might trample down, very roughly, too, any pretension that set itself up against his authority, but once prostrate, he would stoop, in that grand way of his, to soothe the humiliation he had himself inflicted. Then there was nothing mean about Thorold—his nature was essentially manly, even in its blemishes. He was utterly incapable of falsehood, or of living for an hour in the shadow of a lie; this, at least, was the view that from my earliest youth I had taken of his character, and it was the view which my renewed opportunity of observation confirmed. Of sympathy he had not much. He gave me the idea of being too strong to understand the weakness he was ready to support. Like the forest

tree that will hold up the frail parasite against the wildest storm, but will never bend down to the tendrils too weak to rise and cling.

If I had unconsciously reckoned on a return to our early days of courtship, of a renewal of the love-scenes in the Hawkes-hurst shrubberies amid the woodlands of Kelvydon, I soon found myself mistaken. Thorold always seemed happy in my society, but I did not see so much of him as I had hoped to do, and that was the reason I was not *quite* satisfied with his choice of a dwelling. Ferndell was a long way from Woodglen, and by a rough road. True, he had horses, and the frequency of his visits would have excited no comment in Kelvydon, as the rather indefinite relations of "an old friend of the family," justified some degree of intimacy between him and

the ladies of Woodglen. But he was not one of those men who can lounge all day beside a lady's work-table. Welcomed by the "county families," as a bachelor, wealthy, well connected, and well looking, is sure to be everywhere, he was invited to many houses which had not put *my* name on their visiting list, and he had often to plead distant engagements as his excuse for the absence of some days from Woodglen. How could he be otherwise than warmly welcomed in a circle so "exclusive," that the narrowness of its limits almost threatened it with extinction, like a girl who compresses her waist till she "asphyxiates" her lungs. But I knew that a reproachful look from me would, and sometimes did, make him break through any such engagement, and I rarely permitted myself so much as a regret.

After all, what was a lonely day now and then, compared to the years of silent separation that were now over for ever? Yet a few short months, and that word "parting" will be expunged from my life's page.

Colonel Brereton and Mr. Challoner "got on" famously. I had been conscious of some flutter of spirits, when I presented my betrothed to my *former* lover, which he was far too well bred to appear to see, though from his watchful observation of his new associate, and the thoughtful glances which he furtively directed on me, I guessed that my rejection of him was now accounted for to his satisfaction—or the reverse—although I could detect no signs of latent jealousy that could warrant me in believing that he grudged his more fortunate rival his success, for

nothing could be more frank and unaffected than his cordiality to Thorold, whom he seemed really to like from the first.

There was, however, one person in Kelvydon who eyed the new arrival with disfavour, and that was Henny Hogge. She did not, indeed, give frank expression to the feeling, but I detected it in the very smoothness of her voice when she addressed him, in the covert sneer that lurked in her smile, in the fierce flash of her black eyes, when she replied to his careless banter, in which, however courteously veiled, the sagacious old lady did not fail to detect a secret contempt for her lack of womanly delicacy and grace.

I had only my own foolish cowardice to blame for the loss of many a happy hour I might have spent with Thor. He had been careful that his stud should comprise,

beside his own horses, a lady's horse to carry me, and a pony for Sybil, and he proposed that we should ride together, through the cool woods and over the breezy moors. And it would have been so delightful, only I was such a coward! I had never been a horsewoman, and although Thor assured me that the chesnut mare was as quiet as a lamb, how could he know that, when he never saw her until the day he bought her? I did venture upon her one day, but she rolled her eyes so dreadfully that I threw my whip away for fear it might offend her, and she moved her ears and whisked her tail about so wildly. He said it was only the flies that teased her, but I got nervous, and begged and prayed him to take me down. So he did, and then Sybil, who was perfectly fearless, mounted her instead and had a charming ride; and she came

back looking so fresh and rosy, so much more blithe and bonnie than she had looked since Darrell's marriage, that I felt grateful to Thor for giving her a new pleasure, the darling, and willingly consented that he should ride over now and then to take her for a canter ; of course, always with the groom behind them, and usually with Conny Stacy and Maria Gibson of the party.

But if this arrangement contented me, it did not content Miss Henny. I was sitting with her one afternoon, when suddenly a splendid cavalcade came prancing up the street. A stalwart cavalier who presented (to my eyes at least) the model of all masculine beauty, with a lovely lady at his side, who would have seemed, in any eyes, the perfection of feminine charm. Joyous excitement flushed her cheek and

sparkled in her eyes, as she careered triumphantly along, and reined up her palfry under Henny's open window.

"What are you doing there, Miss?" enquired the *Bashanite*, "I thought you were staying at the Manor? How came you racing into Kelvydon Street in this incoherent fashion?"

Before the question could be answered, Thorold had sprung from his horse, and throwing the bridle to the groom who followed him, held out his hand to assist his pretty companion to dismount; but, unskilled in the graces of the *manège*, Sybil, I am ashamed to say, dropped her reins, and instead of leaping lightly to the ground, tumbled into his arms as if she had been a sack of flour, so much to Mr. Challoner's discomfiture, that he held her a moment or two longer than he need have

done, in sheer perplexity. However, she quickly recovered herself, and gathering up her skirt, tripped into Miss Henny's awful presence-chamber, and gave the required explanation in these words,—

“Conny and I—oh, there she is!” (as Miss Stacy rode up) “have ridden all the way from Plaistow, on purpose to tell you, May, and you, Miss Hogge, about the gipsy fête that Colonel Brereton and Thorold have promised to give us in the Brierly woods.”

“Gipsy fête! what new-fangled thing is that—a pic-nic?”

“A sort of pic-nic, only we are to have no servants; we are to wait on each other and camp in the woods, like real gipsies—it will be such fun!”

“And pray what fun will it be for an old woman like me, to go slopping about in

the damp grass, and have my dinner on a mud bank, with a fit of rheumatism for my *desert*? Are you to cook the dinner too? if so, I am afraid it will be vain to wish 'may good digestion wait on appetite.' A pie of Sybil's construction would be too heavy for a team of waggon-horses, and May, in a fit of abstraction, would roast her fowls with the feathers on."

"Nay," said Thor, laughing, "the license is for one day only, and the ladies will not be responsible for the cookery. The fact is, Miss Henny, that Brereton and I wish to make some little acknowledgement of the welcome we have received in the neighbourhood, and as Ferndell Cottage is too small for anything but a bachelor party, we have decided on making the Brierly woods our reception room. Mrs. Stacy suggested a gipsy fête, and has

kindly promised to superintend the arrangements."

"And we are to have our separate camps," said Sybil, gleefully; "and Conny and I invite you to ours, Miss Henny—there will be ten of us."

While Sybil spoke, Henny's keen glances seemed noting every detail of her dress and figure; then she flashed a quick look at Thorold, took a pinch of snuff, and replied,—

"All right, I'll be sure to join your party, Sybil, because the gentlemen are sure to keep *you* well supplied with all the dainties going, whoever else is forgotten. That horse of yours is getting impatient, Mr. Challoner."

At this plain hint—for the horses were perfectly quiet—the riding party took leave. I gazed admiringly at my darling,

as her guardian lifted her into the saddle, arranged her skirt, and placed the bridle properly in her fingers. She glanced her pretty sidelong look at me, waved her hand, and cantered away ; but when I turned with a smile to Henny, lo ! she was scowling grimly.

"If you allow that girl to ride," she snarled, "you should at least send her to a riding-school to be taught to get on and off her horse like a lady. Ride ! she can't ride more than a cow."

"Oh," I answered, carelessly, "Thorold will soon teach her."

Thereupon my companion's eyes glowed on me like two gig lamps.

"May Wharnecliffe ! do you mean to allow Sybil and Thorold to go careering about the roads any day, and every day, alone together, in this fashion ?"

“They are not alone, they have Conny and the grooms with them ; but what would it matter if they were ? When Sybil shares our new home, who will be a better chaperon for her than my husband ?”

“Who could be a worse, I should say. Have you forgotten that Sybil, though she is a goose, is one of the most beautiful girls it is possible to meet, and that Thorold Challoner is fully sensible of that fact ?”

“He would be very blind if he were not,” I answered, laughing merrily.

“And have you forgotten that Mr. Challoner is avowedly sensitive to the influence of beauty ? Do you understand what that means in a man ? It means liability to temptation—to such temptation as cannot assail a pure woman, but which can, and often does, undermine and overcome the loyalty of an otherwise honourable

man. Ah ! I see a flush and a flash—I have touched you now."

I was silent for a moment, trying to repress the wrath that flamed within me ; but when I spoke it was with calmness.

"I am sorry for you, Miss Henny ; you must have suffered very deeply, before such unwomanly suspicions could become the bitter outgrowth of your mind. As for me, my trust is too firmly rooted in a twelve years' fidelity, to be shaken by a severer test than Thorold's natural admiration of *our* sister's beauty. If I could believe such temptation as you speak of possible to him, I should not think his fidelity worth a regret."

So saying, I turned from her, and marched out of the room, very lofty and scornful, but I had softened before I reached Woodglen. Poor desolate old

Henny ! I daresay her warning was kindly meant. She thinks no barque can steer safely past the rock on which *her* venture was wrecked.

As I walked pensively into my drawing-room, some one swooped down on me from behind the door, and caught me up as if I had been a kitten.

"Oh, Thor ! how came you here ? I thought you were gone back to Plais-tow."

"I have stolen ten minutes to spend with you, Miette ; 'stolen waters are sweet.' Do you remember, when you were a chit, and I made you steal away from your governess to show you a litter of puppies I had brought to the Lodge gate for you to see ? I could have got leave any day to show them to you at Hawkeshurst, but the charm was in the secrecy."

"No, you tyrant, the charm was in the sense of your power over me, making me a rebel to more rightful authority; but, Thor, what have you done with the girls?"

"They are gone on before. My horse cast a shoe—I took him to the smithy, promising to overtake them, as I shall do before they get over Walford Hill. Conny's brute of a pony can only do five miles an hour up hill, so I have just ten minutes with you, May, and no more—make much of me!"

"Ah, Thorold, the last shred of romance will have fallen from our love, when Kelvycdon is called in to see and 'congratulate.'"

"Our love is so old, my dear, that a wedding garment will be more becoming to it than any costume of romance—ten minutes, mind!"

And when the ten minutes had expired he went. Once he would have lingered—never mind—he left *them* to come to me.

CHAPTER V.

THOROLD DREAMS.

MY Lassie had now fully recovered her girlish spirits and bloom. Mr. Mervyn had done her good service in claiming her assistance in his parish work. In the schools, the lending library, and the choir (for district visiting I considered her far too young) she found plenty of innocent occupation, that called off her thoughts from her own personal sorrows, and, except for an occasional shadow of pensive gravity, I could have believed that she had entirely forgotten them.

Between her and Thorold there had sprung up a very close and affectionate alliance, which delighted me as much as it disgusted that evil-minded Henny. He was her elder brother already, no cold, formal brother-in-law. He seemed literally to bask in her beauty, following her with his eyes as she flitted about the room, or hovered, bird-like, among the flowers, missing no charm of repose or grace of motion in the form that was alike lovely in movement or in rest. It was not the mere vulgar admiration of any man of a pretty woman, but the refined and elevated enjoyment of an artist in the realisation of his highest conception of beauty. He consulted her every wish and whim, and she declared that he was the dearest, kindest, most generous of guardians, and fluttered about him with a caressing playfulness that

would have won any man to the utmost exertion to please her.

One very hot afternoon he walked over from Ferndell, and came in looking so dreadfully tired and heated, that I received him with a scolding.

“Why did you not ride or drive, Thor, or wait till the cool of the evening, if you must walk on such a fiery day?”

“The flies worry the horses so, and I did not know how hot it was till I started. Are you alone, Miette?”

“As you see.”

“Where is Sybil?”

“She is gone with Mrs. Barnes to hunt up some refractory choristers for Mr. Mervyn.”

Thorold flung himself full length on the sofa, and said, peevishly,—

“You are a goose, May, to let that girl

be so much at the beck and call of a young fellow like Mervyn ; she will be falling in love with him, if she has not already."

I laughed. "No danger ! Sybil never cared for him except in his clerical capacity, and never will."

"The clerical capacity," rejoined Thor, "means a great capacity for love making, and successful love making, too—hang the fellow!"

"How cross you are, my friend, you are over tired—shall I make you some 'fizz ?'"

"Do. Mix it properly, as I taught you, such services are highly becoming in—"

"Barmaids !"

"Hallo ! are you growing saucy ? You have been too much with the Hogge ; if you attempt sarcasm, it will be my duty to

interdict any further communication between you and your uncouth pet, your she Caliban."

I brought him his sparkling draught, leaning over the head of the couch as he drank it off; but as I took the glass from him, and was turning towards the table, he suddenly caught me round the waist.

"Oh, Thor!" I expostulated, "let me put the glass down."

But with his other hand he snatched the tumbler from me, and threw it across the room.

"How dare you, you bear!"

"If I be a bear, you are bound to bear with me. Do you love me, May?"

"Just a little."

"Well, I am content, a little is as much as I deserve."

"I do not love you more than you

deserve, mine own, in loving you, as I do, with every vein of my heart."

"What if I am not true to you, Miette?"

"I cannot imagine that for one moment; your fidelity is my conception of you—it is you. You are nothing if not faithful."

"And you are nothing if not trusting; a jealous woman is the most repulsive form of humanity. Look in my face, Miette."

And as I bent down smilingly, and looked into his clear, bright eyes, he said,—

"I have been true to you, Mayette, and will be ever so, to our lives' end. Lay your little hand on my forehead, on my eyelids—so, flower-soft touch! By the way, Mite, you should not let your sister handle the spade and trowel as she does—there was positively a corn on her hand

the other day ! A corn on a young girl's hand ! atrocious !”

“ Poor Sybil !” I laughed ; “ she is not to walk for fear of Mr. Mervyn, and not to garden for fear of spoiling her hands ! Why, Thor, you are assuming as despotic a rule over my little sister as over me.”

“ Ah, well, never mind Sybil—what made me think of the little puss just then ? Press closer on my eyelids, I am looking at a dream picture, a picture of what I saw fourteen years ago, on just such a summer afternoon as this—can you see it ?”

“ Show it me, and I will.”

“ Your father sits on the garden chair, under the great ash tree on the Rectory lawn ; you stand behind it, as you stand behind this sofa now. Such a tiny, delicate figure ! it looks like a fairy just alighted from a blossom ; but human, not fairy-like,

is the faint rose blush on the soft cheek,
and the tender light in the modest eyes,
that half seek mine, half droop beneath
them shyly. Oh, the triumph of knowing
that the glance and the blush were for me !
Gone ! gone ! past recall, past regret !
'Oh, death in life, the days that are no
more !'

"Is it my lost beauty that you are so
plaintively lamenting, sir ? There is more
of pathos than of gallantry in the regret—
am I grown such a fright ?"

He made no reply. I gave him a little
shake—"Speak, the sleeping vixen stirs
in me ! you contemn my charms !"

"Let me alone, May ; you have dis-
persed the image, and it was so perfect.
I could see Mrs. Wharnecliffe crossing the
lawn with her child in her arms, and the
Rector's rapt attention to his paper, though

there was a sly smile on his kind mouth, too, when the young lovers took advantage of his seeming abstraction to steal away into the shrubbery, where the wild flowers grew, that you used to wreath in your hair. Those were my sentimental days, Miette."

"They were of brief duration," I laughed, "you were never very sentimental, Thor. You had been too long accustomed to tyrannise over me, not speedily to resume the habit. Do you recollect compelling me to go shooting with you, to teach me to stand fire, as you said?"

"And how bravely you tried to stand it, though you winced and paled; what a cruel brute I was, Mite! But you brought me to repentance, or at least remorse, that day—"

"The day you shot my kitten, without

meaning it—I was sure you never meant it."

"No. I only meant to scare you by shooting *at* her; but you were avenged. I hate to see a woman cry, and the tears you shed might have drowned the victim. I never saw you shed so many tears but once again in your life, my May."

He drew me closer to him, and I whispered, softly,—

"Those tears were not shed *alone*, Thor dearest."

"He deserved that we should weep for him, for he was a father to us both." Then, after a moment's silence,— "Poor little woman! I am afraid there were many more tears shed in that gloomy parlour in Bedford Square, on the shady side of it; but it is over now. Was your life very sad, Miette, when we parted?"

"No, Thorold, for it was always gladdened by trust in the affection of one who was toiling, far away, for me."

"For you? yes, in a sense I was toiling for you; but work has a worth for a man for its own sake, and had you not been the promised reward of effort, the effort would have been as strenuous and persistent, so in common honesty, Mite, I must not let you adore me too much for that!"

He laughed gaily, and looked so frank and manly—so handsome, too!—and so like the Thorold of my girlish days, that I felt it would be very difficult for me not to adore him.

"And now," he said, rising, "I will leave you while I am yet under the influence of that sweet dream picture."

"Nay, Thor, I don't quite like that—

it is like shutting out the sunlight to dream of the dawn. Don't let me think that the present is insipid to you—that you only care for the past."

"Who ever cares much for the present, my dear? but it is not only the past I care for—I think of the future, little May!"

"Won't you stop for Lassie? she will be home very shortly."

"Not to-day. I tell you I am in the phantom land of Memory, when Sybil was a puling infant. By the way, I had nearly forgotten, I have brought her a note from Miss Stacy, about this gipsy fête—the girls are wild about it. Your beautiful sister will be the nominal Queen of that fête, Miette, but my little May Queen will wear the rightful crown—Sybil will only reign as Regent."

CHAPTER VI.

GIPSYING.

I HONESTLY confess that, on the morning of the Brierley "gipsy party" I bestowed more thought upon my toilette combinations than was quite seemly in a person of my advanced years. But I wished to do my utmost to grace my lover's festival and do honour to his fastidious taste. And I felt pleased and flattered when Sybil came and stood before me, with her pretty head on one side, critically examining me from head to foot, and then, clapping her hands gleefully, cried—

“ Oh, May, you coquettish little darling, never tell me again that you don’t care for gaiety ! Why, your eyes shoot out sparkles of joy, like the wavelets in the brook, when the trout leaps up in it ! What is that wicked colour on your cheek ? I believe I could kiss it off ! And that dainty dress, so delicate and flower-like ! For whom do you make yourself so pretty, Miette ?”

“ For those who love me, Lassie, all the beauty my art can muster is only just enough for them !”

“ Oh ! you sweetest !” cried my sister rapturously, “ you look too choice and rare for our vulgar earth ! You should be borne on the wings of a humming-bird. You should be folded in the corolla of a lily.”

“ Pending which arrangement, dear, I’ll

take my seat in the doctor's 'wan,' which I
I hear stop at the door."

I verily believe half the population of Kelvydon was in the street, in that July sunshine, to watch the start for the Brierley "pic-nicking"—and I am afraid there must have been great vulgarity in our evident anticipations of enjoyment, or how could there have been such smiling sympathy in many a face that could never share it but as a spectator?

Dr. Barnes' waggonette was in requisition for our party, which consisted of himself as driver, his wife and her niece, Sybil and me, Miss Henny and Mr. Mervyn. Lassie looked fresh and sweet as the first rose that blossomed in Eden! I saw Miss Elliott, who was a stranger, glance with a keen scrutiny over every article of her attire, as if trying to find out the particular detail that produced so becoming an effect; per-

haps, in the wild hope of one day rivalling it. Was it that white chip hat, with its simple garland of *bluets*? Or those blue bows relieving the white muslin dress and mantle? It could not certainly be her way of dressing her hair! So unfashionable! No chignon, no frisette, nothing but those glossy bands, braided closely round her small head, and falling in a wealth of rich curls, from the ribbon that confined it at the back. No, Miss Elliott, vainly would you rival my Lassie by copying all these. Vainly even, would you borrow her perfect beauty unless you possessed too the charm which enhances it—the innocent vivacity, always modest and maidenly, even when most childlike, and the loving sweetness which at the least shadow on a loved brow, will sadden the curve of the playful lips, and deepen the light in the laughing eyes, over

which the long dark lashes fell—a little uneasily, I thought—beneath the persistent gaze of her vis-à-vis—the enamoured curate. It was rude of Mr. Mervyn to stare at her so. He abused the advantage of his position—but I think he was scarcely conscious of it.

The momentary bashfulness did not greatly check Sybil's gaiety. I had not seen her in such high spirits since she had parted from Darrell, less than a year ago, and when I thought of this, and that we were driving over the very hills—through the very lanes where she had listened to his vows of love, I almost feared that there might be something forced in her liveliness. But no—that sweet laugh rang true. Great are the reparative forces of early youth ! If *I* had lost Thorold in my girlhood—but there is no parallel between our cases. Darrell was a comparative stranger to her,

and it is impossible for me to imagine a false Thorold, even though "falsely true" to *me*!

Miss Henny looked unusually placid, and her costume was less *bizarre* than I had ever seen it, only, for consistency's sake, I suppose, she held over her head a huge yellow umbrella, which she called a sun-shade, quite a miniature tent, with one ghostly skeleton tip protruding from the seam, which, at every jolt on the rough roads, kept diving, as with the dig of a spiteful finger-nail, now down the back of Mr. Mervyn's neck, now with a claw at Sybil's curls—if they had been false, it would have inevitably borne them off like the trophy of an Indian scalp-hunter,—and then, with a sudden whirl, it would menace Mrs. Barnes' blue spectacles. But this slight discomfort had no effect on the general good humour.

Indeed, I suspect that some of us were glad of our immunity from Miss Henny's caustic remarks, which we owed to her difficulty in steering her aggressive umbrella.

It was a very hot day, and the hottest time of the day; we had seven miles to drive over a hilly, but so thickly wooded country that we suffered less than might have been expected, in this first stage of our pleasure hunting. Still, with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Mervyn, who resembled a clerical Dumbidikes, in his prolonged and silent contemplation of his lady-love, we were all glad when the carriage drove into the cool glades of the Brierley woods, and the tenants of Ferndell Lodge hastened forwards to receive and welcome us.

We were the latest arrivals, it seemed. The rest of the party had "encamped" in a cool spot at a little distance from the cot-

tage, and were busied with their preparations for a banquet, after their long drive. Some of them had come twelve or fourteen miles, and our hosts were waiting to lead us to them.

I could not refrain from a furtive glance of triumph at Henny, as Thorold drew my hand under his arm, with a little fond pressure that, of course, *she* knew nothing of, and led me away, leaving the rest to follow under Colonel Brereton's charge, with merely a smiling nod to Sybil.

How happy and proud I was ! How I wished that the rest had been miles away, instead of being, as they were, only a few hundred yards off. They were "encamped" on a wooded knoll, where the trees formed a circle round a kind of amphitheatre, where the brushwood was so scant, the turf so smooth and free from the lush grasses and

tangled undergrowth of brambles, as to give rise to a suspicion that the choice of a banqueting hall was not so impromptu as we were asked to believe, and that gardeners, with their implements, had been our precursors there. The "assistants" did not look much like gipsies, except Henny, who might have passed for a gipsy queen ; they were far more like the revellers in the famed gardens of Bocaccio, as the emerald-tinted forest light fell on the gay dresses and many-coloured plumes of the lovely ladies who glided in and out among the trees, or leaned on mossy cushions at their roots, with their attendant cavaliers hovering round them. It is a pity, as regards the pictorial effect of these meetings, that our masculine costume is so dull and prosaic. Will no man of fashion invent a dress to be worn on such occasions

only, and, *de rigueur* on them, that should contribute some brilliancy of colour and grace of form ?

The important ceremony of the day once happily inaugurated, all went on merrily. Our hosts had certainly not trusted to the gipsy cookery of their fair friends. The hampers, which Mrs. Stacy and her boys unpacked so fussily, were more odorous of Fortnam and Mason than of any less skilful purveyors.

Beneath the genial influence of the feast, the slight constraint seemingly inevitable in English social gatherings, soon passed off,—and not until the rage of famine had been appeased, was it discovered that in our choice of a dining hall, we had forgotten that “planetary motion” would soon necessarily deprive us of the shade which had tempted us in the early morning.

But when the intrusive sunbeams began to warm the champagne and melt the ices—and, worse,—to menace fair faces with sunburn and freckles, there arose a murmur of discontent, which was met by a proposal to adjourn to the chapel, an old and very beautiful ruin on the lower ground, nearer the river.

“Colonel Brereton,” said Emma Langley, a pert damsel of fifteen,—“why did you not have lunch laid in the chapel? It is always cool there, and we should have eaten our ices in peace and tranquillity, and used the Holy Well as a wine cooler.”

“You must blame Challoner for that, Emma. I did propose it, but he objected that some of our party had never seen the chapel, and that their pleasure in seeing it would be very much diminished if its beauty were

desecrated by such profane objects as bottles and pie-dishes."

I knew instantly that it was of *me* Thorold had thought when he said this, and I thanked him with a glance as I passed him with the troop that swept on to the path which led to the ruin. He looked down on me and smiled, but he did not join me, as I hoped he would, though I lingered a little behind the rest. He stood a moment talking to old Lady Forbes, and then ran off by a side path to overtake the advance-guard, and I gained nothing by my loitering but the companionship of Miss Hogge, who presently came up to me, and claimed my arm to assist her in threading the "wild greenwood," which she had not visited for years.

Well, of course, I was—or ought to have

been—happy if my society could be any comfort to her; still, I could not help feeling a little disappointed,—for, certes, I had not looked forward to such a pleasant day, to spend it *tête-à-tête* with Henny Hogge!

But she prattled away as gleefully as if she did not notice my annoyance.

“A pretty scene, is it not, May?—this woodland path along the noisy brawling river, that rushes foaming over the rocks as fussily as if it thought it was keeping the ocean waiting for it. Ah, there is a troop of young people on before us, with an elderly aunt or mother stationed at proper distances, to keep order. By the way, Miss Wharnecliffe, you had better keep guard on your lover, for I assure you Madam Stacy has designs on him for a son-in-law.”

“Ridiculous!—Thorold is too old for any of her daughters.”

“Not at all,—she was asking me just now if Mr. Challoner was quite fancy-free, as regards his pretty ward.”

“Pshaw!”

“And when I assured her that Sybil was like a young sister to him, she asked me so many questions about his family, fortune, &c., that I saw directly what was in her mind. Thorold and you, May, are so marvellously discreet and guarded in your manner to each other, that nobody suspects how the case really stands between you.”

I made no answer.

“Her only difficulty is, to know to which of them she will allot him. Conny’s settlement would remove an obstacle from Maria Gibson’s path,—and she would gladly

see her off her hands,—but she naturally wishes to secure the best match for her own girl, who is neither an heiress nor a beauty. Here she is,—close behind us,—watch now, and you shall see how I will make her choice waver between the rival candidates.”

Before I could remonstrate, Mrs. Stacy came up with us, and the path being too narrow for three, I fell a step behind.

A few yards in front of us, Constance Stacy was walking with Sybil on one side of her and Maria Gibson on the other. Thorold had overtaken them, and walked between the two girls, falling back occasionally with one or the other, when the path narrowed. At a little distance before them walked a noisy, chirruping group of youths and maidens, led by Colonel Brereton.

"Ah, Mrs. Stacy,"—began Henny, in that soft, wheedling lisp, which, with her, always meant mischief,—"what a thing it is to be young! How those young people are enjoying themselves! Mr. Challoner is quite fascinated by your girls! Miss Wharnecliffe cannot get a look from him—though she is such an old friend."

Oh, the wretch! I could have flung a stone at her.

"The attraction is quite mutual, Miss Hogge," answered the mother, purringly. "Mr. Challoner is a great favourite with both my daughters! What a handsome man he is,—and how distinguished looking!"

"Do you know," said Henny, confidentially, "I tried to find out which of the two young ladies he preferred; but I could not bring him to confession, he would

only say, that Miss Stacy was very elegant, and Miss Gibson very intellectual."

Pure invention. I am sure Thor never said such a word.

"I believe a feather would turn the scale in favour of either."

"And that feather, neither of my girls would throw into the balance to win any gentleman's preference," said Mrs. Stacy loftily.

"I am sure of that," replied her mendacious interlocutor. "Constance is too cold to care for any man, and Maria is too much engrossed by the pursuit of the 'common objects' of insect life, to care for the 'common object' of most single women of her age."

Mrs. Stacy was silent.

I wondered was she scrutinising the countenance of her sarcastic companion, or

only watching the party in advance of us. They were standing still now. Thorold was leaning over Maria, who held up something impaled on the spike of a microscope for his inspection.

Miss Henny resumed—

“ He will be a good match, as regards fortune and connexion. He is heir to Sir Franklin Challoner, you know,—whose estate is strictly entailed.”

“ I beg your pardon, Miss Henny,—one moment,—Constance!—Conny, my love!”

Constance let go Sybil’s hand, and came back to her step-mother.

“ My dear girl, Miss Wharnecliffe cannot keep up with you, and you are leaving her to walk alone. Go on with her,—gently,—you can overtake the others by and bye!”

Then to her friend—

“ You were saying—”

“ The property goes with the title,—and their child is a daughter ; but then, to be sure, she is a baby. They may have a troop of sons yet.”

“ To be sure they may. Conny, you bad girl, I see your heart is with Sybil. Miss Wharniecliffe, your sister has quite bewitched my daughter,—they are inseparable. Run forward, my dear, and tell Maria to walk with Miss Wharniecliffe.”

The docile Maria pocketed her microscope, and obeyed ; but Henny was not satisfied.

“ Not so sure either,—he’ll be a baronet, you’ll see, before long. Sir Franklin is in wretched health, and this child of theirs was a surprise,—they have been married

some years, and Lady Harriet was certainly not young when she married."

" Dear me, what a curious fly that is. Maria, you have your microscope ? Do ask Mr. Challoner if this is not the fly they call in New Zealand the—the—I forget the name ; but he will know what I mean."

The docile Maria rejoined her sister accordingly ; but the manœuvre failed, for Thorold professed himself no entymologist; and, falling back, came to my side, and in this order we arrived at the chapel.

It was a mere ruin, no silent aisles, no solemn cloisters, no altar, no tombs. Nothing was left but the arch of a doorway, and part of a mullioned window, festooned with wreaths of ivy and bryony, in nature's smiling mockery of the monu-

ments of man's perishable art. In the midst was a well, from which a pure, sparkling thread of water crept down, traced by the emerald hue of the grass through which it trickled, to the rapid river that flowed between wooded rocks below.

Tired, and heated by our walk, we threw ourselves on the sward in the shadow of the ruins, pell-mell, but somehow, Mr. Mervyn had contrived to place himself beside Sybil, who bent over the spring, gazing at the reflection of her own sweet face in its depths, while Thorold lay at my feet, and Constance Stacy nestled closer to Colonel Brereton than she was justified in doing, by any want of room. Henny eyed her grimly, and her expression did not soften, when, with a sudden cry of alarm, Miss Stacy threw herself back

and hid her eyes on “Cousin John’s” shoulder.

“It’s only a devil’s coach-horse,” cried Harry Stacy, pouncing on a black insect of the beetle tribe, that was trying to conceal itself under his sister’s drapery. “It won’t hurt you, Conny, shall I kill it?”

“No, no, Harry,” interposed Maria, “don’t crush it, it is mine! it has crawled out of my box, it is a lovely specimen of *Staphylineas Oleas*. Look, Mr. Challoner, it sticks up its tail like that, to discharge an acrid fluid (quite harmless) from two little glands beneath the abdomen, as its only means of self-defence. Is it not a beautiful provision of nature?”

“A disagreeable provision of ill-nature, I should say,” laughed Thorold, “since you admit it is useless for its self-defence. Miss Gibson, have you any more of such

things in your pocket, for if so, the young ladies will give you a wide berth."

"Only a few caterpillars," answered Maria, replacing the vermin in its box, "and a mole-cricket that Harry found."

This announcement produced "sensation" among the ladies immediately surrounding the fair naturalist, and Conny clung shuddering to Colonel Brereton, so closely, that to avoid entire absorption, he put her gently from him, and went across to Mrs. Barnes.

"Why is not Miss Caroline of your party?" he asked.

"Caroline is at her aunt's, Colonel Brereton. I have sent her there with her two little sisters, until my new governess comes. You have heard that Miss Boyden has left me quite suddenly?"

"Yes," said Henny, "she is going to be

married to my friend Bryanston Brabbles, the Baptist preacher. ‘Brimstone Babbles,’ I call him. Mr. Mervyn, how did you manage to let one of your sheep slip from your fold? Miss Boyden used to be a staunch churchwoman.”

“And so she was,” said Mrs. Barnes, “until she got acquainted with the Dissenter, and it was natural that she should go over to his congregation, when she meant to marry the man.”

Thorold glanced at me with a smile, and said—“He for God only, she for God in him.”

He spoke low, but Mr. Mervyn overheard him.

“Ah,” he said, “is not that all that is lacking to perfect our mutual relations? If men did indeed live for ‘God only,’ would not woman be safe and happy,

in living, as she so often does, only for God in him?"

Mr. Mervyn is a good man, and spoke, I am sure, in the fulness of his own convictions that Miss Boyden was neither "safe" nor "happy" in living for a Baptist preacher; and his eyes, reverently lowered as he spoke the Holiest Name, did not meet the quick glance that Sybil darted at him, a glance expressing so much cordial sympathy, such respectful, even affectionate approval! All his languishing love-glances had never won such a response from those beautiful eyes before. But though Mr. Mervyn did not see it, my Thorold did, and it displeased him, for he said a little rudely—

"Now, Mervyn, I call you to order! I protest against your preaching a sermon at a pic-nic!"

“But you gave me the text,” answered the curate good humouredly ; and, as if to console him for the rebuff, Sybil leant towards him.

“Look, Mr. Mervyn,” said she, holding out to him a sprig of fern, which, while Thorold spoke, she had been twisting impatiently in her fingers, “Is not this the—Oh, I have bruised it so, you cannot distinguish the variety, but I know where I can get some more.” And springing to her feet, she tripped away, followed by her delighted admirer, and vanished among the glittering stems of the silver birches that fringed the woodland path.

Thorold looked after her, and his brow clouded a little. Perhaps he thought she was coquetting with Mr. Mervyn, but I know she had only an

innocent wish to convince him, that in her eyes, at least, his grave comment on Mr. Challoner's quotation, was not ill-timed.

My little sister was soon missed, when some one proposed singing, for her voice was always in request. I rose in my turn, to go in search of her, and soon met her and Mr. Mervyn returning. But I declined to go back with them, and walked on slowly by the river-side, until the sound of laughing voices died away in a silence unbroken except by the light rustle of the wind among the branches, and the dash of the water over the rocks.

On I went, pausing from moment to moment, without turning my head, as I fancied I heard a step hastening behind me, the step for which I never

vainly listened, among the coppices of Hawkeshurst. No, all is hushed, only a squirrel leaping among the branches, only the rush of the water.

The path I had chosen, led to a cave or grotto in the rock. It looked green and cool, and I went in and seated myself on a stone, and looked out from the arched entrance, on a long vista of twining boughs, and grey rocks jutting out here and there, and the swift river glittering and foaming beneath them. All was still, except that now and then, far away, came a higher, more sustained note of one of the singers' voices, and sometimes a shrill laugh. They had not missed me! Gradually the quiet that had at first soothed, began to depress me. The grotto was like a tomb. I could fancy myself dead and in my sepulchre. The murmur of the river is

like the inarticulate moan of past, yet ever passing sorrow. Those pale ferns and mosses that cling to the damp wall, have nothing of the bloom of flowers that open to the sun, for the sunshine never enters here. And yet—oh, magical transformation! the river's moan becomes a merry music, the dim grotto is resplendent with emerald light, and all the lush mosses twinkle and glisten more brilliantly than the jewellery in Aladdin's cave—for a loving arm is flung round me, and a laughing voice cries archly—"Is my little Miette waiting here for me?"

END OF VOL. II.

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